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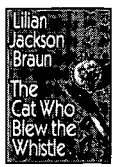

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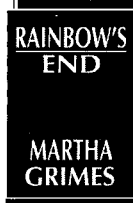

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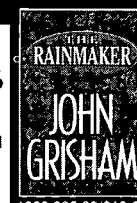

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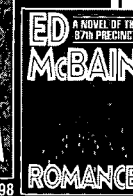

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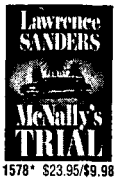

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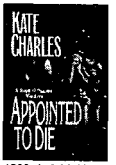

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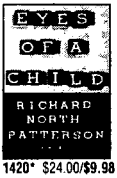

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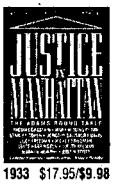

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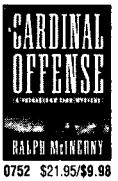

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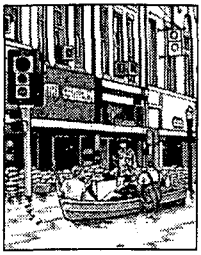

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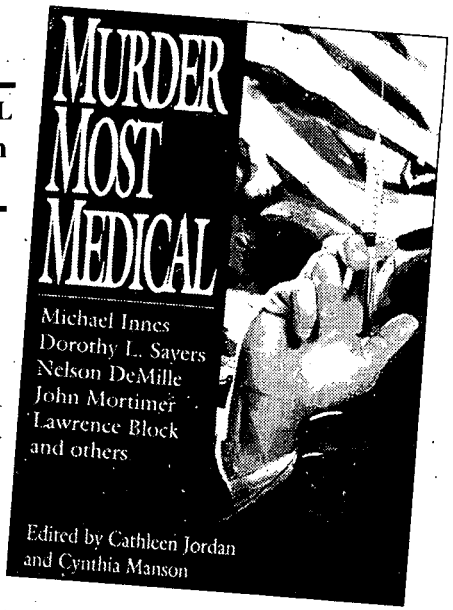

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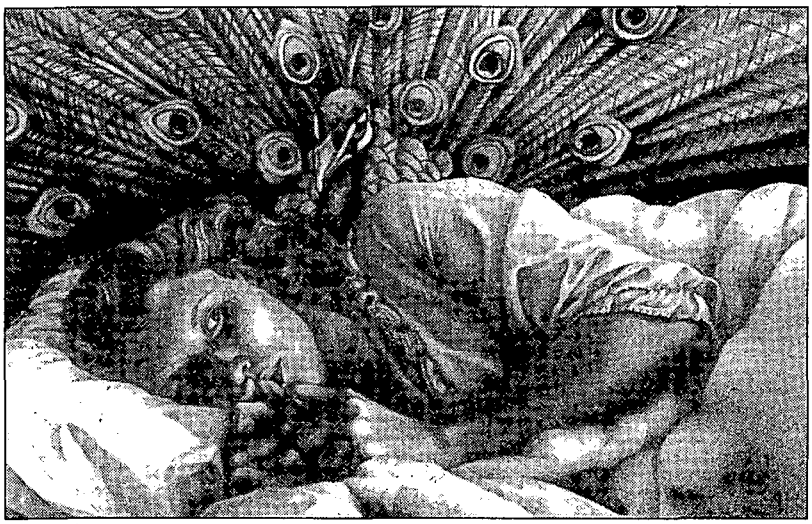

Art by Gina Mohr LoParo

THE PEACOCK'S FEATHER

by Celia Fremlin

My roommate was horrified. "Don't bring that thing in here!" she cried. "Don't you know it's unlucky to bring a peacock's feather indoors?"

No, I didn't know; and I was somewhat taken aback by this reception of my happy find. It had fallen almost at my feet from the spread tail of one of the tame and lordly peacocks that paced the lawns outside this conference house, and I'd assumed that Estelle would be as intrigued as I was by this felicitous bit of decoration for our rather bare quarters. And as for peacocks' feathers being unlucky—really, I have no patience with this sort of thing. Touching wood—walking under ladders—not passing on the stairs on a Friday: All this sort of nonsense just annoys me; and so my first impulse was to laugh, to tell Estelle not to be so silly, and to set the lovely thing up where it would show to best advantage against the white walls of the sparsely

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furnished bedroom which Estelle and I had found ourselves sharing for the weekend. The two of us had never met before. All we initially had in common was membership in the nationwide writers' organisation that was running this conference; that, and also a slightly impecunious lifestyle which had induced each of us to tick the Willing-to-Share column of the booking form, thus saving £10 from the full fee. Thus had we been thrown together as strangers, more or less at random.

However, as commonly happens in this situation, a prolonged exchange of life stories, far into the night, had revealed plenty of other areas of shared experience: both of us thirty-something, childless, and with a failed marriage behind us; and both currently feeling our way, with some trepidation, towards what we hoped would be a new and rewarding future.

Here, however, the similarity ended. The difference between our two sets of ambitions was very marked. Estelle's vision of the new and rewarding future included (indeed, totally revolved around) finding a new and eligible man; whereas mine was grimly focussed on becoming a successful full-time writer—a real possibility (I was beginning to feel) now that my evenings and weekends were entirely my own, to spend exactly as I pleased without reference to anyone else's wishes or convenience. I had already, in the eighteen months since the breakup of my marriage, managed to complete my first novel. It had already been favourably received by the very first publisher to whom I had sent it, and had even been put in for one of the prestigious literary prizes that come round each year. Not that it would have much of a chance—the competition was tremendous; but all the same, even to be *considered* for such a prize . . .

Celia Fremlin was born in Kent, England, and attended Oxford University, where she received degrees in classics and philosophy. During World War II she served as an air-raid warden. She married in 1942 and began her career as a writer in 1943 with a work of non-fiction. Her fiction was first published in the 1950s and ever since she has been one of the most subtle and convincing voices in mystery fiction. ¶

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"Please—*please* take it away, Janet!" Estelle was repeating; but still I stood in the doorway, hesitating, clutching the feather between my finger and thumb. It was looking more beautiful than ever. A shaft of sunlight through the nearby window had set the greens and blues merging and dancing in unimaginable glory.

"Estelle! Look! Look!" I cried. "How can anything so beautiful be *un*lucky?" and I swung the feather in a rainbow arc back and forth across the width of doorway, catching the sun with every shimmering curve. "See? If you *must* believe in nonsense, why not believe that a beautiful thing like this is *lucky?* It *looks* lucky, it really does! And don't we both *need* some luck?"

We did indeed—Estelle almost more than I. She had come to this conference—on the pretext of two rather mediocre articles in her local paper—with the sole and simple purpose of meeting an eligible man of vaguely respectable credentials (she had this idea that writers were likely to be vaguely respectable), and had already had to face the depressing fact that there were hardly any men at all; and that the few who were here were quite exceptionally ineligible. Not only were they married (not, in itself, an insuperable bar to successful capture, as both Estelle and I had learned to our cost), but every single one of them had his wife actually with him. In each case, it was the wife who was the aspiring writer, and the husband had come along not because he wanted to socialise with writers, but because he didn't fancy being left to cook his own meals for a whole weekend.

Not quite the setting for high romance. Estelle had already faced this—you could say, indeed, that this *was* her bit of bad luck for the weekend; a featherweight more or less would be neither here nor there.

These thoughts—or something rather like them—seemed to be flickering in Estelle's greeny-grey eyes. Unmade-up eyes they were too—she hadn't bothered to put any makeup at all on her pale, freckled features. Well, it wasn't worth it, was it? Really she had nothing to lose, peacock's feather or no peacock's feather.

In accordance with this calculation, I took another hesitant step into the room.

"Well, all right," Estelle was now saying grudgingly. "If you must. But don't blame me, Janet, if something awful happens!"

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I promised I wouldn't—some promises are really easy to make.

"I won't blame the feather, either," I couldn't help adding. And (with a little laugh), "Will *you* give it the credit if something wonderful happens? Will you admit, then, that it's a *lucky* feather? Look, I'll prop it up on that shelf above your bed, so that *you'll* be the one to get the luck. So that the speaker this morning will turn out to be some gorgeous hunk, aged forty-two, and he'll be so impressed by the brilliance of your contribution to the discussion that he'll . . ."

"It's not as funny as you think, Janet," she responded huffily. "And no, don't put it on *my* shelf, I don't want it, put it on the one above *your* bed. And don't say I didn't warn you. . . . Listen, isn't that the bell?"

It was; and soon the two of us had joined the throng trooping across the lawn to the lecture hall, all agog for the talk on Marketing Short Stories.

Alas, it wasn't a gorgeous hunk aged forty-two who awaited us. It was an acerbitous little lady in her glittering, successful sixties, and she set herself to convince her audience that the most effective way to get a short story published was to have had a whole lot of short stories successfully published already. Depressing news, one would suppose, for the many beginners in the audience.

However, as it turned out, no one seemed in the least bit depressed. After all, the sun was shining, and were they not enjoying a whole weekend of someone else cooking the meals? And ahead lay a free afternoon for sprawling on the lawn, breathing in the scent of roses, and enjoying a quietness broken only by the occasional lugubrious cry from one or another of the peacocks.

"See what I mean?" Estelle sighed as the lugubrious yearning cries gathered force towards four o'clock; and I had to point out that what the birds so desolately yearned for was bits of cake and biscuit and broken bread rolls, all of which they received in plenty from willing hands. Not from Estelle's hands, though. "I'd rather not," she said, adding darkly: "You'd better be careful!"

Careful of what? I've no idea. The pecks from those greedy beaks were so light, so soft, as scarcely to be pecks at all.

That night we didn't sit up talking—both of us were too tired, I suppose, after last night's exchange of life stories. I at least was sound asleep well before midnight.

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I don't know how long it was—a couple of hours, perhaps—before I was woken, with frightful suddenness, by a sharp and desperate cry. A peacock? In the middle of the night? But the sound had seemed so near, so loud. . . . Unless there was a peacock right here in the room with us . . . ?

But by now I was properly awake and looking across the space between the beds. I could see by the faint glow from the fanlight above the door that Estelle was sitting bolt upright in bed. She was shivering.

"Estelle! Whatever is it? What's happened?" And at once she began to apologise. "Oh Janet, I'm so sorry! I never meant to wake you, but I had this awful dream . . ."

"What awful dream?" I'm not sure that I really wanted to know, but one has to ask; and I'm afraid I felt nothing but relief when she said she couldn't tell me. "You see," she explained, "it's Sunday already—and you know what they say: 'Saturday's dreams on Sunday told'—they come true! And I couldn't bear that!" Here she paused. "It was about *you,* Janet! It was so awful!"

If she was hoping to whet my curiosity enough to give her an excuse for relating her silly dream, she was disappointed. I didn't react at all, even when she said it all over again: "It was about *you,* Janet! I couldn't bear it to come true!"

"No, of course not," I responded briskly; and after a few more soothing words—well, I hope they were soothing—I settled myself back in bed and was soon asleep.

I think Estelle was too; anyway, there were no more disturbances, and next morning, having woken rather late, we hurried down to breakfast without either of us having brought up the subject of last night's excitement. No doubt, I thought, Estelle must be feeling pretty foolish by now, and I didn't want to upset her by rubbing it in. After all, we had another day to get through together.

It was on Monday morning that the news came, just when we were all packing up to go home.

"Janet Munns wanted on the phone," someone called; and when, a few minutes later, I came back to the common room, there was a small, expectant silence.

"I hope it wasn't *bad* news, Janet?" Estelle said to me, in suitably concerned tones. But she *did* hope it was. You could

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see it in her greedily snapping eyes, indeed in the whole of her body language. She wanted to be proved right about that wretched feather far, far more than she wanted anything good to happen to me, her new friend. It occurred to me in that moment that she wasn't really a very nice person.

No, I assured her, not bad news at all; on the contrary: And I watched her face even while she mouthed her congratulations.

For I had won the prize. *My* novel had won first prize in this grand literary competition! It was incredible! It was almost too marvellous to believe! and while the chorus of congratulations rose around me, I could not resist the temptation to score off Estelle just a little bit. "*Now* what price your theory about peacocks' feathers being unlucky indoors! My feather has been indoors almost the whole weekend, and just look at the luck I'm having!"

Such luck! Such luck! The most fantastic, incredible luck!

Of course, I didn't know then just what was going to happen during my journey up to London for the prize-giving ceremony. Even the young signalman, whose fault it was all going to be, could have known absolutely nothing at this stage.

It's all been in the news, of course. Lying here in my hospital bed I listen to the news constantly. It's been on the front page of all the papers, too.

Somewhere (I never got around to asking her address) Estelle must be laughing her head off. I told you that she wasn't really a very nice person. ●

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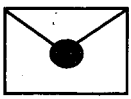

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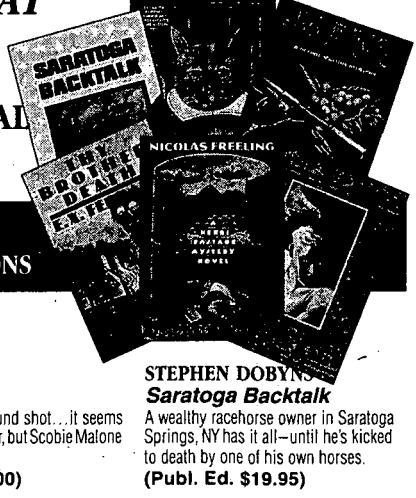

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The Hudson Chain

by Edward D. Hoch

Espionage, treachery, high treason: Our own history provides material aplenty for writers who want to mine that vein, and what better place to start than the Revolutionary War. We're not sure whether to describe the following piece as a series or non-series story (only time will tell), but we think you'll like Edward D. Hoch's new character Alexander Swift, a troubleshooter for George Washington during the War of Independence.

The rough mountain trails that connected West Point with the furnace and forge at Sterling Pond were still drifted with snow in spots, even though it was the end of March in this year of Our Lord 1778. Spurring his horse over the uncertain terrain, Alexander Swift was reminded again that the colonies fighting their war of independence had just suffered through one of the harshest winters of the century. General George Washington was still encamped at Valley Forge with his army, awaiting the arrival of spring, and word of their suffering had traveled north with the couriers who traversed the snowy countryside to keep open the lines of communication.

It was a twenty-five-mile ride over the mountains to Sterling, but Swift preferred it to the longer, if easier, route through Central Valley. His horse was well up to the mountain journey, which they'd already made a few times during breaks in the harsh winter. When the Sterling hearths themselves finally came into view, showering sparks by the edge of the great pond, the horse seemed to pick up speed for the final moments of the journey.

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It was Chester Hayborne, the foreman, who came out to greet him. "Have you ridden up from Camp West Point?" he asked as Swift dismounted.

"I have. The day seemed right for it, and General Washington is nervous for word on the chain. He had hoped it would be in place by the first week of April."

"We will not miss that deadline by much. Come in, and I will show you our progress. How is the snow through the mountains?"

"Still deep in spots but quite passable. We will soon have this bloody winter behind us."

Hayborne was a man in his thirties, with muscles hardened from working at the forge. His face and arms were blackened by soot from the wood and charcoal used to heat the iron ore to a molten state. Alexander Swift followed him into the nearest of the buildings, feeling the intense heat as it flowed over his body in waves. Foundrymen were busy pounding red-hot bars of iron into shape, then bending them into links around a mandrel.

"Hot work," Swift remarked.

"The hottest. We welcome the cold winter here, even though there were days in recent months when the depth of the snow kept us from our labor. Here, look at what we have for George Washington's watch chain."

It was a name Swift had heard used before in referring to the gigantic chain being forged to stretch across the Hudson at West Point. It would have 750 giant links of two-inch-thick bar iron, with eight swivels and eighty clevises to yoke the sections of the chain together. Seeing the finished sections of nine links each, with a single clevis and pin, stretched out and ready for transport by ox sledges and water, he couldn't help but be impressed.

He tried to lift just one of the links. "In God's name, how much do these weigh?"

"The average weight is about one hundred fourteen pounds each, though we have one link that weighed in at one hundred thirty pounds. Each section of chain weighs more than half a ton. As you can see, they are formed from bar iron two inches square, with each link being about twelve inches wide by eighteen inches long. We trust it is much stronger than the chain at Fort Montgomery last year."

Alexander Swift still remembered General Washington's fury at that debacle, when the British outflanked the fort with an

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overland attack and then sailed up to the chain and filed away one link to break the barrier and open the river. Washington wanted the new chain to be strong enough to withstand a ramming by several of His Majesty's warships.

"When will you deliver it?" he asked the foreman.

"One of your officers, Colonel Clay, is here now working out the schedule."

The news surprised Swift. He had not seen Colonel Clay since arriving at West Point. He knew there was a feeling that as a civilian working directly for General Washington he'd come north to prepare reports critical of the garrison at Camp West Point. In truth, Washington only wanted the chain in position. He was not seeking to place blame.

"I should see the colonel," Swift said. "Take me to him."

Colonel Jeremy Clay was a Pennsylvania farmer who'd been one of the first to take up arms against the British. He was a gaunt man with sandy hair and the appearance of an outdoorsman. Swift had known him in New York before the British capture of the city in 1776. They found him in the foundry office going over the timetable for transporting the chain to West Point. He glanced up from the papers on the desk, showing a flicker of annoyance when he recognized Alexander.

"Ah, Swift, isn't it? I haven't seen you since before the hostilities began. You were getting married then. How's your wife?"

"She died," Swift replied without emotion.

"Oh. Sorry to hear that." He immediately dismissed the unpleasant thought. "Have you been in contact with General Washington?"

"I visited him at Valley Forge a fortnight ago."

"I know he is concerned about the chain, but you can assure him it will be solidly in place soon."

"How soon?" Swift asked.

"I told him you were working on it," Chester Hayborne said.

"I'll handle this now, Chester. You can leave us alone."

The foreman nodded and left them in the office.

"The chain was to be in place by next week," Alexander Swift said when they were alone.

"There will be a slight delay with no harm done. The winter weather is still with us and it will be another month before any skipper would be foolish enough to sail this far up the Hudson."

"Hayborne says the sections of chain are all but complete."

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"That they are," Jeremy Clay confirmed. "The ironworks has been operating twenty-four hours a day for the past two months to fill the government order in record time. Sledges pulled by oxen will begin hauling the sections of chain down to the river tomorrow. The chain has eighty-four sections in all, which means eighty-four trips with the ox sledges. Then the chain will have to be assembled at a small foundry at the water's edge and floated down the river to West Point on pitch-covered log rafts. We'll have it in place, with its protective boom, within weeks."

Swift studied again the now-familiar chart of that portion of the Hudson, with its narrow S-shaped curve. He had to agree with General Washington that it was the most effective place to block the river, with gun positions able to target any ships approaching the chain. Still, "Do you think it will work, Clay? The one at Fort Montgomery—"

"This one is far thicker and stronger. The only problem might be its removal each fall and replacement the following spring. The frozen river would play havoc with the chain if we left it in place during the winter. Besides, the log platforms that buoy it up will need to be replaced each year to keep them afloat."

Swift nodded. "The General is resigned to that fact, and will issue the orders himself at the proper time each year. Is there any danger of Camp West Point and Fort Constitution across the river being outflanked as was Fort Montgomery?"

"Very little. Our main threat comes from Loyalist spies who are thick in the countryside."

"Spies? What could they do?"

"Keep the British advised of our progress." He reached into the deerskin knapsack at his side and brought forth a letter which he passed to Alexander.

"It seems to be a message from a daughter to her mother in New York," Swift said, skimming the lengthy letter.

"But look!" The colonel held the paper up to the light from the window and pointed out a number of tiny pinpricks. "These indicate certain letters which spell out the real message: *Rebels have six 32-pounders and twenty small cannon at Camp West Point. Chain across river in place by late April.*"

Swift could hardly believe his ears. He took back the letter and examined the pinpricks, spelling out each word. "Where did you find this?"

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"In the pouch of a traveler trying to cross enemy lines north of New York. You can see it is dated March twenty-second, just last week."

"It seems there is a spy operating at West Point."

"Very likely. While this message did not get through, there will certainly be others."

"Do you think the British will attack the chain?"

Colonel Clay nodded. "At the first opportunity, if only because it is General Washington's personal project."

Alexander Swift made a decision. "I will remain at West Point until the chain is secure across the Hudson."

"Do what you wish, but the spy is my affair. When I find him I will enjoy watching him hanged from the nearest tree."

Camp West Point was a relatively small garrison, established to guard the river at this narrow bend. The British had long felt that the Hudson, with its passage into Canada via Lake George and Lake Champlain, was the key to splitting the Colonies. Only a year earlier Washington had said, "The importance of the Hudson River in the present contest, and the necessity of defending it, are subjects which have been so frequently and fully discussed, and are so well understood, that it is unnecessary to enlarge upon them. These facts at once appear when it is considered that the river runs through a whole state; that it is the only passage by which the enemy from New York, or any part of our coast, can ever hope to cooperate with an army from Canada; that the possession of it is indispensably essential to preserve the communication between the Eastern, Middle, and Southern States; and further, that upon its security, in a great measure, depend our chief supplies of flour for the subsistence of such forces as we may have occasion for in the course of the War."

Washington had tried other methods of blocking the river. The chain at Fort Montgomery had failed, as had the chevaux-de-frise at Fort Washington. These were a submerged shallow-water version of an old Dutch anti-cavalry device, using sunken timbers with projecting iron spears to puncture the hulls of the enemy's wooden ships. But the Hudson was too deep for them to be effective, and its powerful tides played havoc with the devices. Fire ships and fire rafts against enemy ships also proved ineffective and too easy to avoid.

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Since he was not a military man, Swift did not stay at the camp itself, but at a small nearby settlement which had sprung up almost overnight to cater to the needs of the soldiers on duty at West Point and other nearby forts. On prior visits he'd stayed at a tavern called the Nugget of Gold. He returned there now and was pleased to see the same man behind the bar. Norb Flander was the owner of the place, a red-faced man in his fifties who'd worked at a tavern on Manhattan Island until the British came in '76. He'd moved north along the river like a great many others, finally pausing near West Point to build his own place. He'd bought an old barn for its wood, torn it down, and built the Nugget of Gold.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Swift," he said by way of greeting. "I got your room waiting for you. Want your usual bourbon?"

"That will be fine, Norb."

"I think the weather's finally beginning to warm up."

"It should. It's been a long winter."

A couple of off-duty soldiers from the camp were standing at the other end of the bar, but Swift didn't recognize them. He drank the bourbon down quickly and ordered another. After a bit more small talk he asked Flander, "You get many strangers around here?"

"Hardly at all. With the war going on, every stranger might be a Loyalist spy."

Swift sipped his second drink, having no intention of finishing it. "How's Molly? I don't see her around." Molly McVey was a barmaid who worked there occasionally. Swift had become friendly with her on his previous trips to the camp.

"Probably with one of the officers. You know how it is."

"Tell her I was asking for her." He left the rest of his drink and went around to his room at the back of the tavern.

He almost hoped Molly would visit him later, but finally he fell asleep alone.

The weather was damp and chilly during the first week in April, but ice was breaking up in the river. Alexander Swift watched it each day and thought about the great chain—George Washington's watch chain. On April 7, when half the chain had been assembled upstream, it was loaded on rafts of pitch-covered logs for the final leg of its journey to Camp West Point. Swift met Chester Hayborne and his crew at New Windsor, about fifteen

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miles upriver, where the chain-laden rafts were being launched.

"We'll keep them close to shore," the foreman told Swift. "If there is an accident we don't want to lose the chain in the deepest part of the river." He wore a sealskin jacket and cap as protection against the damp mist over the water, and watched carefully as his men poled the rafts along the shoreline.

"Colonel Clay is concerned about Tory spies," Swift told him. "Have you seen any strangers about?"

"Just the usual townsfolk. I've known them most of my life."

"Keep an eye out," Swift cautioned him.

"Are you in charge of the chain project now?"

"No, I'm just observing the progress for General Washington. Colonel Clay and Captain Machin are the military people in charge, and, of course, General McDougall." He was the senior officer in charge of all the highland posts. "When do you expect the remainder of the chain will be ready for us?"

The muscular foreman shrugged. "A week, ten days. No longer than that."

Alexander Swift nodded. "I'll be back then."

Returning to West Point, Swift found Captain Machin, the officer who had designed the chain and arranged for its construction, watching with Clay as the first half of it was made fast to the shoreline. "Soon it will be in place," Clay said happily. "If the enemy lets us alone two weeks longer, the job will be done."

Two nights later, as Alexander Swift drank with Norb Flander in the bar at the Nugget of Gold, he noticed a curly-haired stranger at one of the tables. "Who is that?" he asked Flander.

"A fur merchant named Rowland, down from Canada."

"Ever seen him before?"

Norb Flander shook his head. "He's new to these parts."

Swift picked up his drink and joined the man at the table, introducing himself. "Pleased to meet you," Rowland said, extending his hand. Up close, the mass of curly blond locks seemed almost too large for the man's head. Swift wondered if it might be a wig.

"Flander tells me you're a fur merchant from Canada."

"That's right."

"This is a dangerous place to sell your goods, in the midst of a revolution."

"I feel safe in this area," the man said. "Since the British defeat at Saratoga last October they have stayed away. The

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French in Canada are now supporting your struggle."

"They stayed away only because of the harsh winter," Swift reasoned. "Now that spring is coming you will see their sails once more on the Hudson."

The merchant, who appeared not much older than Swift's own twenty-eight years, replied, "But your chain will stop them."

"Which chain would that be?" Swift asked innocently.

" 'Tis no secret in these parts. I see it lying down by the water's edge like some sun-basking serpent."

"It's not wise to pass such observations along to others," Swift warned him.

"I would not," the merchant assured him. He finished his drink and made a nervous exit from the tavern.

"Watch that one," Swift advised Norb Flander. "I do not like the look of him."

It was the following night when Molly McVey returned to West Point. Alexander saw her as soon as he walked into the Nugget of Gold. Oddly, she was standing by a table where the Canadian fur merchant, Rowland, sat whittling on a piece of wood, his left hand using a sharp hunting knife to carve out the shape of a rough wooden chain with three interlocked links. Swift watched him finish the task and pass it to Molly. "There you are. It's my gift to you," he told her with a smile.

"How clever you are!" She tucked it away in her dress and then seemed to notice Swift for the first time. "Hello, Alex. It's good to see you again." She was the only one, other than his wife, who had ever called him Alex.

"You've been away," he said.

She turned and said goodbye to the fur merchant, then followed Swift to a table near the opposite end of the bar. Norb Flander came over with a bourbon for him and a beer for Molly. "I was visiting a friend in Albany," she said. "How long have you been here?"

"Ten days."

Molly McVey was a slender, dark-haired woman with a creamy white complexion and a way of wearing dresses a bit tighter than the fashion allowed. She was probably a bit older than Swift. She was certainly wiser in many things. "You're looking good," she told him. "Most of my friends are pale and worn after this hard winter."

"I've made a few trips to Valley Forge through the deep snow

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in New Jersey. That ride will keep any man in shape."

"How is General Washington?"

"Vigorous and aching for combat. It's amazing how he's kept up the spirits of his troops through this winter, despite the terrible conditions and the death of so many from starvation."

"How long will he remain there?"

Alexander shrugged. "Perhaps till June if the British do not attack. He has Baron von Steuben with him, training and reorganizing the army."

"At least this winter is at an end," she said.

They had another drink and then he followed her up the creaking stairs to her room above the bar. When he looked back, the man named Rowland was carving out another of his little wooden chains.

He found himself drifting in and out of sleep until it was nearly dawn. At one point Molly said to him, "The chain is a big secret, isn't it?"

"We hope so, until it's in place. General Washington never mentions it directly in his letters."

She held up the wooden links that Rowland had given her. "Do you think the Canadian is a spy?"

"He could be."

And later, "Alex?"

"What is it, my love?"

"I heard something about you in Albany. People gossip, you know."

"What did you hear?"

"That your wife isn't dead at all. That she ran off with a British officer in New York."

He didn't answer, only lay there feeling the weight of the sheets. "Do you still love her?" Molly asked, but he didn't reply. Finally she asked, "If you found them, would you kill him?"

"Perhaps," he said, more to himself than to Molly.

"Would you kill her?"

He didn't answer. After a time he slept.

By April 16 the second half of the chain had been assembled at New Windsor. It was another damp day full of gray clouds and misty rain. When Alexander Swift reached the place, he saw Hayborne in the shallow water with his workers, trying to hoist a pair of giant links back onto their raft. Finally they

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succeeded and he came out of the water to dry off, fanning himself with his sealskin cap.

"That's hard work, Swift. Work for younger men than me."

"It'll soon be over."

The foreman shouted at his men to keep the rafts out of deep water as they began their journey downriver. Then he put the cap back on and strolled along with Alexander. "Over till the next job. They get harder in the summer with all that heat at the foundry."

Suddenly Swift saw someone on the hill above them. He recognized the mop of curly blond hair at once, even though he hadn't seen Rowland around for several days. "See that man? Do you know him?"

"I don't think so."

"Be careful. He may be a Tory spy."

"Glad you warned me."

Swift mounted up, preparing to ride back along the river, following the rafts in their progress downstream. Chester Hayborne disappeared from view among the pine trees, and he could no longer see Rowland anywhere. He'd ridden about fifty yards when some noise made him turn and look back. Hayborne had emerged from the trees and was walking along a raised bluff that commanded a good view of the river to the south. Perhaps he was checking the progress of the rafts, though the visibility through the mist had grown poorer.

Almost at once a second figure burst forth from the trees, running after Hayborne. Swift recognized Rowland's curly blond hair at once, and saw the hunting knife in his raised right hand.

"Rowland! Don't!" Hayborne shouted, and turned to face his attacker.

The knife plunged in again and again, through the sealskin jacket. The foreman fell to the ground at the edge of the bluff even as Swift spurred his mount forward. Rowland pushed the body with his foot and it rolled off the edge of the bluff, falling a dozen feet to the water.

The current was swift at this point and Alexander saw the body turning over and over as it was swept along. He tried to reach it, urging his horse into the shallow water near shore, but the body was moving too fast, sweeping toward the river's center. The hat came off, bobbed a moment, and then vanished with the body. Chester Hayborne was gone, and his killer had vanished

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as well. There was no sign of Rowland among the trees.

Immediately upon his return Swift sought out Colonel Clay. He was not among the men working at the water's edge under the command of Captain Machin. "Where is Clay?" he asked the captain.

"I haven't seen him lately. Try his quarters."

Swift finally found him talking with Flander at the Nugget of Gold. He reported what had happened to Chester Hayborne. "You actually witnessed this murder?" he asked.

"I did, Colonel. Rowland stabbed him to death while I watched."

"Is there any possibility he might have survived?"

"None. I saw the body being swept away by the river."

"I don't believe I ever saw this man Rowland. Do we have an artist in the camp who might sketch him from your description?"

Norb Flander had been listening at the bar. "Molly's something of an artist, and she talked to him a couple of times. She could probably do it."

Norb found Molly in her room and brought her down. Her eyes moved from Swift to Clay while they explained what they needed. "You think he's a spy?" she repeated. Swift saw that she was fingering the little links of wooden chain as she spoke.

"And a murderer," Alexander added. "He killed Hayborne from the foundry."

"Why would he do that?"

"The British want to destroy the chain and make certain we can't replace it."

She went upstairs for her paper and sketching pencils. Swift had seen some of her drawings before, but he wondered about her ability to capture an accurate likeness of Rowland. Seated at the bar, she did a quick sketch and then began to fill in the shadings of the face and hair.

"Did you think he was wearing a wig?" Swift asked her.

"He could have been. If so, I'll have to draw him with it on because I never saw him any other way."

Flander peered over her shoulder, offering comments and suggestions. "I think the eyes are a little off, Molly. Weren't they a bit closer together?"

Alexander made suggestions too, based on his memory, and before long they had a passable likeness of the man who called

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himself Rowland. Colonel Clay took it and assured them it would be seen by every man at the camp. "I'll post it at mess," he promised.

"Let Molly make a copy," Flander suggested, "and I'll post it here at the bar as well."

Swift had personal doubts that it would do any good. If Rowland had been wearing a wig his appearance could be quite different already.

Two days later, on the twentieth, Captain Machin reported to General McDougall. Seventeen hundred feet of the great chain was ready for use, more than enough to cross the Hudson at West Point. They only needed to wait for favorable weather to fix it in place. On the slack tide of April 30, the weather finally broke. One end of the chain was made fast to a huge rock crib some ten feet high and eight feet wide, then slowly winched across the river to a similar crate filled with stone on the opposite bank. With both ends secure and the massive chain stapled to pine log rafts, the Hudson was finally effectively blocked.

"This is a great day," Swift told Colonel Clay as they stood on the shore surveying the scene.

"Tell that to General Washington. His wild dream has come true."

"I still wonder if a large ship, with a metal prow, might strike the chain at full sail and break it."

It was a thought that had obviously bothered the colonel as well. "The foundry is turning out a smaller chain for a boom. The work was slowed by the killing of Chester Hayborne but it proceeds at a good pace now." The boom, designed to float slightly downstream from the chain, was a series of foot-thick logs, fifteen feet long, spaced four feet apart and parallel to the water's flow, linked by sections of chain and iron bolts. The idea was that the boom would help absorb the shock of a ramming by an enemy warship, protecting the great chain from breaking. When the weather was favorable, loosely laid planks could turn the boom into a footbridge.

Swift spoke of it again that night with Molly. "It seems like a great deal of money for a chain across the river," she said. "And one man has died for it."

"Others may, too, if the British attempt to ram it."

"Is the Hudson that important?"

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"It is our new nation's lifeline, as General Washington has pointed out many times. In the land east of the river there is no flour, to the west there is no meat. The two parts of our struggling nation have an absolute need for each other."

"When will the boom be in place?"

"In a few days, we hope."

"You'll be leaving then?"

"I expect so, yes."

"With Rowland still at large?"

"Colonel Clay and the others can deal with him, should he return. By now he's probably in Canada."

She fingered the chain of rough wood that Rowland had carved for her. "Where will you go next?"

"General Washington will have a place for me."

"You'd rather do this than serve in the regular army? If you're caught behind enemy lines, couldn't you be hanged as a spy?"

"I try to avoid enemy lines as much as possible."

"Don't you ever want to sneak into New York, to see her? Do you know where she is?"

"I know the street, I know the house. I can see her in my mind right now." He had turned away as he spoke.

Molly reached out to touch his face in the darkness. "Will I ever see you after you leave here?"

"I'm sure I'll be back. Washington will want periodic reports on his watch chain."

"It's different when you're here. This whole place is different. These few weeks have made everything else bearable."

"Sleep now," he told her softly. "I'm here. I won't be going away quite yet."

By the time the boom was finally in place, the hills of the Hudson Valley were alive with mayflowers. The harsh winter had been forgotten with the arrival of spring. Alexander took Molly for a walk on the plank bridge across the river, and she marveled at her first close look at the giant chain.

"It's enormous, Alex! Even seeing it on the shore didn't prepare me for this. It would hold back Caesar's army!"

"But will it hold back King George's navy? That is the question. They still command the Hudson south of Peekskill."

Back on shore she held tight to his arm. "You took me out there because you're leaving tomorrow, aren't you?"

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"We each have work to do."

"My work can wait," she replied with a touch of bitterness. "There are always soldiers to be comforted."

"Let us stop at the Nugget for a drink."

Norb Flander brought them their drinks and said, "We're all feeling better now that the boom is in place."

"Any sign of Rowland?"

The proprietor glanced back at Molly's sketch posted on the wall. "Not a bit. If he's been here he's a different person."

"He just might be that," Swift agreed, remembering the curly blond hair.

While she drank, Molly had taken out the carved wooden chain again and was playing with it. There were times when Swift wanted to take it from her and hurl it far away into the night. It was the gift of a spy and a murderer. Now, staring at it as if hypnotized, his mind suddenly cleared. "What is it?" she asked, noting the strange expression on his face.

"I've been a fool," he said.

"What—?"

"Flander, what night is the new moon this month?"

"Soon now. The night sky is already dark as pitch."

"But what night will it be darkest?"

"Thursday—two nights from now."

He nodded, then said to Molly, "I'll be staying through Thursday night."

The following day Alexander Swift spoke privately with Captain Machin, because the Hudson chain was ultimately his responsibility. Certain preparations were made, though he could see the captain thought him just a bit crazy.

He sat up Wednesday night watching the water, because he could not afford to be wrong. Once, after midnight, Molly came down to where he sat in the darkness. "Nothing's going to happen tonight," she said. "Come up to bed."

"I'll be up shortly. I suppose you're right. If the British were coming they'd be here by now."

On Thursday morning the chain still held, floating serenely on the unusually calm water. He went down to the boom and walked carefully across to the other side, watching for anything unusual. The chain was undamaged, exactly as it had been. When he reached the opposite side, at Fort Constitution, he

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inspected the large pile of wood he'd instructed Captain Machin to build on either shore. Then he walked back across the footbridge to the West Point side.

"You look worried," Norb Flander told him later when he stopped in the Nugget of Gold.

"Just apprehensive."

Norb poured him a drink. "Why do you think the British might attack tonight?"

"It's darkest with a new moon, and the current is moving slowly. If they're coming by night to try filing through a link as they did at Fort Montgomery, this is when they'll do it."

"But our chain is stronger."

"I hope so."

Even on the darkest night it was impossible to move a large British warship up the river without attracting attention. Progress would be slowed by the danger of running aground, and if spies tried to guide it from the riverbanks their torches would be seen from the forts. Swift knew the attack, if it came at all, would come by small boats sneaking silently up the river.

As it happened, it was Molly who spotted them first. It was just before midnight when she tugged on his sleeve. "Alex! There's something moving on the river!"

He saw it then, but couldn't make out what it was. "Stay here," he whispered. "I'm going out on the boom. If you hear a shot, have them light the fires."

He hurried onto the wooden footbridge, drawing a loaded flintlock pistol from his belt. If they were bent on cutting the chain—

Then he heard soft voices, and knew they were up ahead, climbing out of their boats and onto the boom. Some would be swimming under the boom to the chain itself. He aimed into the darkness ahead and fired the pistol. There was an immediate scurry and splashing as the men on the boom dove for safety. Then, behind him on the shore, a torch blazed and the pile of wood caught fire. The guards at Fort Constitution lit their bonfire as well.

Now suddenly the river was alive with light, the waters reflecting the twin fires growing by the minute into towers of flame. Swift saw now that there were two boats ahead, rowed upstream against the current. Men were in the water, dark figures whose faces reflected the red glow of the sky. Then he saw

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something that sent a chill through him. One of the swimmers was on the giant chain, clinging to a bobbing raft while he crammed a package inside a link.

Gunpowder.

They were trying to blow up the chain.

The man pulled out a long fuse and struck a large-headed friction match to light it. Swift hurled his single-shot pistol at him, missed, and leaped from the boom onto the nearest raft. From both shores came the scattered chatter of musket fire.

"Don't light it!" Alexander Swift warned.

The fuse sputtered into life. "You're too late," came the reply.

Swift leaped the four feet onto the adjoining raft and grabbed for the fuse. The other pulled out a hunting knife—the same one, surely—and raised it to strike.

"Not this time," Swift shouted. "No more killings, no more escapes." He went in under the knife and slammed the man down onto the giant chain. Then he grabbed for the fuse and pulled it free of the gunpowder.

There was more firing and an oarsman in one of the boats toppled into the water. The others swam to shore where soldiers were waiting. Colonel Clay and his men came running out with torches along the footbridge as Swift hauled up his prisoner.

"Here's your man!" Swift told them, and the torchlight fell on the face of the foundry foreman, Chester Hayborne.

When the Tory forces had been rounded up and the gunpowder bomb safely removed, Alexander Swift found himself with Colonel Clay and Captain Machin at the Nugget of Gold. Drinks were on the house, Flander said, and Molly served them.

"You knew it was Hayborne?" Colonel Clay asked, incredulous. "You knew he was still alive?"

Swift nodded. "See this little chain Molly has? I watched the stranger, Rowland, carve it with the knife in his left hand. That day on the river, the curly-haired man who stabbed Hayborne and pushed the body into the river struck with his right hand. When I remembered that the other night I was sure of one thing—the murderer had not been Rowland. Yet how was that possible? I myself heard Hayborne's voice shout out 'Rowland! Don't!' an instant before the stabbing. But then I remembered something else. That shouted plea came just *before* the man in the sealskin cap turned to confront his attacker! It was the at-

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tacker who shouted those words, not the victim. And if the attacker was not Rowland, it had to be Hayborne because I'd recognized his voice."

"Why would he shout out at all?" Clay wondered.

"To attract my attention, of course. He needed a witness to swear the victim had been Hayborne, and the killer Rowland. I should have been suspicious right away, because to my knowledge Hayborne didn't even know Rowland when he shouted the name. If you read over that intercepted secret message again you will see that it implies the spy has a knowledge of the great chain and its timing, yet is probably not someone stationed or living at West Point. Otherwise he or she would long ago have sent word on the number of cannons at the camp. It suggested that the spy might be a foundry worker who went to West Point only occasionally."

"Then Rowland came here to meet with Hayborne?"

"Exactly. By that time, however, I'd mentioned the possibility of spies. Hayborne was nervous and must have guessed his message had been intercepted. He decided to fake his death and make his way south to the British lines. Rowland afforded the perfect opportunity with that curly blond wig. Hayborne must have persuaded him to change clothes to avoid capture as a spy. Rowland donned the sealskin jacket and cap while Hayborne put on the wig and Rowland's coat. Then, after attracting my attention, Hayborne stabbed Rowland and pushed him into the Hudson. With the switched clothing and the poor visibility that day, he thought he could fool me. The body lost its cap, but since I'd never seen Rowland without his wig I still didn't recognize him. So far as I knew, the foreman was dead and Rowland had killed him. Hayborne was safe in assuming the body wouldn't be recovered from the swift-flowing river. He joined the British forces and led a raiding party back tonight to sever the chain with a gunpowder bomb, choosing a night they knew the sky would be at its darkest."

Clay finished his drink and stood up. "Chester Hayborne will be properly dealt with, and I will personally commend your actions to General McDougall and the Commander-in-Chief."

Swift shook his hand. "I leave in the morning for Valley Forge. Guard the chain, Colonel. Guard it well. Its links are holding this new nation together."

When he rode out at dawn the next day only Molly was there to see him, waving from her upstairs window at the Nugget of Gold. ●

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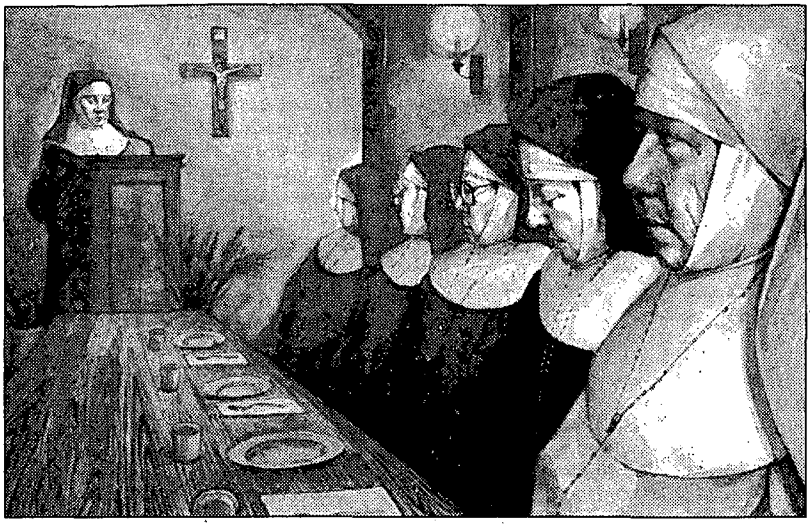

Art by Gabriella Dellosso

When Your Breath Freezes

by Kathleen Dougherty

There are seven of us.

I am Sister Ellen: the youngest, the ugliest, the least devout, the most fragile. I need the vast silences of northern Alaska and the imposed silence of this cloister. The souls of these women are quiet, their musings as distant as the Chukchi Sea. The nuns have taken me in for the winter, an act of charity, a charity they might well regret. But they don't know about my special ability, my accursed gift. If they did, they'd shun me as others have. Their unspoken thoughts, though, are safe from me. Nothing could compel me again to peruse the mind of another. What you see there are the ugly shapes of nightmares.

© 1995 by Kathleen Dougherty

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Under my white robes, the color for a novice, are a pair of expedition-weight long johns, the fabric a heat-retaining, sweat-wicking synthetic; then a pair of wind-blocking pile pants. We have no television, no radio, yet we have the latest in underwear.

Off come the sturdy black shoes and on go the insulated knee-high boots. I unpin the white novice's veil from my hair and hang the veil on a wall peg. I slide a black ski mask over my head, position the mouth and eye holes. I like wearing the mask; its blank anonymity hides my facial scars. There is only one mirror here, in the infirmary. I have little use for mirrors.

I wrap my neck with the wool scarf knitted by Sister Gabrielle. I think tenderly of her gnarled hands, twisted by arthritis, the black yarn, and the slow clack of the needles. She had embroidered "Ellen" on a cloth tag. My fingers work a stretch cap on top of the ski mask, then I shrug on the anorak with its thick pile of yellow fleece lining, its rich fringe of fox fur around the hood. The drawstring snugs the hood low on my forehead and up over my mouth. The fur tickles and has that dusty aroma of animal skin.

Last are the glove liners and the padded mittens with Velcro wrist bands. Even before I open the heavy wooden door, I imagine I hear the cows lowing, though that's not possible. The wind's voice whips away sound and, deceptively, mimics the wail of a cat, a distant locomotive, an unhappy ghost.

I flick on the outdoor lights and step beyond the door, pulling it closed behind me. The frigid air steals my breath. Outside all is the white of an unusually bitter February. Though midmorn-

Kathleen Dougherty's forte is psychological thrillers, or as she puts it, explorations of "the dark underbelly of the mind." Her first two novels, which led Berkley's paperback list, employed specialized knowledge she acquired when she held jobs as a district sales manager for an artificial intelligence company and as a research associate in pharmacology. She draws on some of that experience in "When Your Breath Freezes," which was one of seven finalists in MWA's 50th Anniversary Short Story Contest.

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ing, there are hours before dawn bleaches the sky. My teeth chatter. It is colder than death out here.

The north wind pauses in its cold rush. I spit. The saliva crackles, freezing in midair, and shatters like glass on the walkway. Cold, very cold, even by the standards of northern Alaska. More than seventy below. Gusts sweep snow pellets, hard as gravel, across the covered walkway to the barn. That wooden structure, like the convent, appears to sprout from the mountainside.

During the Yukon gold rush, miners hewed these caverns, clawing from granite the shelters that shielded them from brutal winters. The south-facing walls are wood; north-facing walls and much of the ceiling are the smoothed underbelly of the mountain. Snaking into the earth from those north walls are tunnels; a few lead to steaming pools of hot springs, potable—though slightly sulfurous—water. After the Second World War, the exhausted claim was purchased by the Immaculata order, and this remote land, once brimming with the harsh voices and greed of prospectors, became the refuge of silent nuns.

The gale blasts against my long skirts and I cover the walkway in a graceless stagger. The barn door sticks, its hinges cranky with cold. I wrench open the door and step inside to rich aromas: cow hide, dung, hay, bird droppings, wood smoke. The miners had used the large room as a barracks. Humid air fogs a tunnel entrance, one which leads to the hot springs, where the nuns take paying guests during the brief summers.

The barn houses two cows, a mangy good-for-nothing goat, and a chicken-wire enclosure with a dozen hens and an irritable cock. The hens set up a comical squawking and fluttering, shocked to their very cores every few hours when I come to tend the wood stove. The cows regard me with their calm brown eyes, aware that it's morning and hoping for fresh fodder. These are, as far as I've seen, the only cows in Alaska, a gift from a rancher in the lower forty-eight. He'd stayed here last summer, Leonidist said, soaking in the convent's hot sulfur springs, and was convinced he'd been miraculously healed of gout.

Pine logs dropped into the wood stove make the coals flare. The stove stands in an isolated hollow scooped from the mountain. The flue disappears into the rocky ceiling.

I milk the cows and the sullen goat, gather eggs from the hens. I slap the cow's haunches, urging them up and down the center

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aisle. They don't like the enforced exercise, but their shanks tend to develop abscesses. Sister Fiske, a paramedic and our only source of medical expertise during these frozen months, prescribed aerobics. The cows want only to stare into their food bins and meditate golden hay into existence. Their resistance makes the stroll hard work and I wonder about the medical benefits for any of us. After half an hour, I stop, panting. Their bony heads study me quietly, a pitying look which makes me smile.

I muck out the stalls and coop, spread down fresh straw, and rake the soiled material to the far entrance. I switch on the outdoor lights. This part gets tricky. If drifts have built up in the past hours, a path will have to be cleared. That means shoveling for two minutes, dashing into the warmth of the barn and scaring the heck out of the chickens, shoveling another two minutes, and so on.

To my delight, the door swings open easily and the path to the garden appears clear. I rake the straw outside and drag the mound a few yards when a snow-dusted rock catches my eye. A mound of black, a large stone that hadn't been there before . . . and with awful clarity the form resolves into that of a huddled person. My chest tenses with shock. I am kneeling next to the shape without memory of moving closer.

She is curled into the fetal position. The ebony veil, hard and shiny, has frozen into place, covering most of the profile, but there's enough exposed to see the broad jaw, the deep etch of lines from nose to mouth, the dark brown mole with its two stiff hairs stark against ashen flesh. Frost has made a mask of the features, smoothed out the web of wrinkles on her full cheeks, lessened the downward draw of persimmon lips. It is Sister Praxades, our cook, who refuses—refused—to bake white bread. In the kitchen with her black sleeves rolled up over dimpled forearms, she taught me to knead whole-grain dough. She smelled of flour and yeast and discontent.

With my right glove and liner off, I touch her throat where, in life, the carotid artery throbs. Her neck is frozen solid, hard and unyielding.

Her pudgy hands and feet are bare, pale as alabaster. How can this be? No one would willingly tromp barefoot in Alaska's winter.

My thoughts are slow lizards, too long in the cold.

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My right hand signs the cross over her body. I mentally begin an Act of Contrition, but retreat to the barn when the air hurts my lungs. Chickens cackle and the goat bleats while I finish the prayer for Sister Praxades, an inadequate charity for a woman who had been more than tolerant of a newcomer.

Tears burn my cheeks. I, who have so little opportunity for love, loved her.

There had been seven of us.

Now there are six.

Reverend Mother thinks in German, a language I don't comprehend. Snatches of words, swirling in her mind-winds, fly out: *schnee, tot, unschuld, verlassen*. She is in her late forties, the youngest except for me, yet authority is a mantle she wears with ease. Her bearing is military, her oval face composed, her gray eyes sharp. Only now her gaze reveals disquiet upon my panicked report of Sister Praxades's death. Reverend Mother's face shutters down; her thoughts whirl. Rosary beads rattle within the folds of her black robes. Her pale lips shape the English words, "Jesus, Mary, Joseph," a favored indulgence of this order. Each nun says this prayer so often that the rhythm becomes one with each inhale and exhale. When the rare words seep from their minds, that is what I sense: JesusMaryJoseph.

Reverend Mother orients on me. Her lapse of control is over. Her fingers sign, *You—lead me—Praxades*. Even now Reverend Mother does not break the quiet meditation.

Her hand halts me as I turn. She shapes sentences fast, too fast, and I shake my head in confusion. She places a long index finger to her lips, then signs, *No tell—others*.

Why not tell the others? They'll know Sister Praxades is missing. I gesture for permission to speak, my sign language inept. Reverend Mother slices her hand in the negative, a command that reminds me of my position here. The shock of finding Sister Praxades has made me exceed my bounds. Flushing, I bow my head in apology, nod compliance, and we exit her office. It is up to Reverend Mother, not the distraught pseudo-novice "Sister" Ellen, to decide when to tell the nuns. If she waits until after the Angelus, before the noon meal when contemplation officially ends, Sister Praxades will not be any less dead for the delay.

In the hall Sister Leonidist, standing on a foot stool, scrapes tallow from a wall sconce. Candle glow highlights the postmeno-

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pausal down of her cheeks and chin. Thick red eyebrows shadow her sockets, making her pale blue eyes seem large and black. Leon the Lion, my pet name for her in my head, is the one I'd have gone to first to share the terrible discovery. She performs a modified curtsy from her perch in respect of Reverend Mother as we pass. I look longingly over my shoulder at Leon. She grins and winks, pretends to stick a finger up one wide nostril.

At the side door, before Reverend Mother dons her anorak, she removes her black headdress. Her hair is a flattened, short gray-brown, and its thinness somehow diminishes her authority. I focus on the splintered wood planks, embarrassed. It is disrespectful to see her so. After a moment, she nudges me, not unkindly. It is time to go out into the cold.

One voice: *"Dominus vobiscum."* The Lord be with you.

Five voices: *"Et cum spiritu tuo."* And with your spirit.

It is noon and the hours of silence end. Reverend Mother observes us from the lectern. Her hands clutch the frame on either side of the Bible. Her knuckles whiten. She is, I know, gathering strength to talk about Sister Praxades. The nuns do not speak. Their minds are suspended in a sea of expectation; no gleanings travel from their consciousness to mine, not even the Jesus, Mary, Joseph prayer. Leon catches my attention with a raised bushy eyebrow and looks pointedly at her lap. She signs: *Cook sick?*

The others may think that. We are not allowed in our cells except to sleep or to rest if we're ill. How I wish Sister Praxades were on her pallet, tucked under quilts, resting away a fever instead of curled miserably outside, the door of her mind forever frozen closed. I hope that whatever malady caused her to wander in the snow also prevented the cook from suffering.

My vision blurs and I drop my gaze to the pine table. In front of me and the four seated nuns are blue ceramic bowls of potato soup, our lunch. In the kitchen I simmered the potatoes in chicken stock—no wonder those fowl squawk with such alarm—and added cream, butter, salt, pepper, and a dash of crisp Chardonnay. As Sister Praxades taught, I tasted and added more butter, cream, tasted and added more spices, tasted and added more wine . . . and still the broth seemed bland.

Rich yellow butter dots the soup's surface, my poor attempt to duplicate the dead woman's craft. Only the bread, a thick,

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sweet rye, can be trusted. The large, round, crusty loaves were baked by the cook yesterday.

Reverend Mother's sharp inhale pulls my attention to the lectern. Her lips press together. "Sister Ellen found Sister Praxades outside this morning. Sister Praxades is dead." The bald statements straighten every spine, including my own.

"No," cries Sister Gabrielle, an old friend of the cook, eldest nun, knitter of woolens for the likes of me. Her misshapen hand fists, hits the table, and spoons jump. Her anguish bolts to my heart. She cries again: "No!"

"Sister Gabrielle," comes the cautioning, authoritative voice of Reverend Mother.

The old nun's mouth gapes, showing too-even dentures. Tears diffuse down cheeks as creased as parchment. She hunches over the table, gasping with hushed sobs, and a thread of saliva descends from her lips. Sister Fiske, the medic, sits next to the stricken woman. Her chin lifts, her eyes narrow behind magnified glasses. A sharp, disapproving line creases between her brows and her mouth thins, a compassionless look from a woman who frets about the abscesses of cows.

At a nod from Reverend Mother, Fiske rises, accompanies the crying Gabrielle into the stone corridor. The old woman's voice muffles in decrescendo. After a moment, the thin creak of the chapel door reveals their location. And in this room . . . silence. Leon stares at her lap. Sister Xavier, our housekeeper, an angular woman with a jaw as square as a box, fingers a soup spoon. She rarely speaks even when conversation is allowed.

Reverend Mother sighs deeply and bows her head. She says, "Why did you doubt?" Stress has made her German accent noticeable. Their shared emotion builds critical mass and penetrates my carefully erected barriers.

Each is deeply, piercingly ashamed.

Reverend Mother restricts me to the kitchen with my bowl of cooling soup while she conducts a private meeting with the others in the dining room. At the pine counter where Praxades taught me to shape loaves of whole wheat, I force myself to finish my lunch. Food is never wasted. Each tight swallow emphasizes my hurt: grief for the cook and, to my chagrin, the wound of being excluded from the nuns' discussion. I don't belong here, I

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chide myself. Why should Reverend Mother behave as though I'll stay beyond the spring thaw?

After I eat and feed more coal to the stove, the temptation to eavesdrop wins. I press my ear against the swinging door to the dining room. Not even hushed conversation seeps through the wood. Pushing the door open a crack—my toes still on the kitchen floor so there isn't technical disobedience—I see the five blue bowls on the table, still full. The nuns are gone.

Determined to be a help and to demonstrate a charity I'm not exactly feeling, I busy myself in the pantry, planning dinner. Surveying the shelves, my gaze touches opaque brown vials, medicines that Sister Praxades took on a complicated schedule. The names on the labels don't mean anything to me; once she showed me the collection on her chubby palm, pointing out one for blood pressure, another for cholesterol, and so on.

I pop the cap of one bottle and spill out beautiful azure capsules into my hand. Whatever her medications were supposed to do, they hadn't done their job last night. Sighing, I return the pills to their container and scoop the half-dozen prescriptions into my pocket. Fiske will want these returned to the infirmary.

I decide on tuna casserole, a dish I'm unlikely to ruin. I gather the canned fish, mushroom soup, noodles, and a stale bag of potato chips. The planks squeak under my tread and I see Praxades of last night, after dinner, sashaying and spinning her robes in exaggerated mockery of Sister Fiske, floorboards complaining under her weight. Mimicry was her gift and no one, myself included, was exempt, but Fiske was the cook's specialty.

At the sink I twist the crank of the opener around the tuna can and indulge the sweet sorrow of memories. Oddly enough, Praxades was liberal while the much younger Fiske was conservative. Praxades wanted a satellite dish and television so she could learn recipes from Julia Child; she wanted a subscription to *Gourmet* magazine, deliverable by bush pilot when weather allowed. In the common room, the arguments between Praxades and Fiske were high entertainment. Fiske struggled to control her indignation, I'll give her that. However, Praxades was a master of provocation. The cook's suggestions would become more and more extreme: The nuns should forgo habits and wear fleece slacks and shirts, the L.L. Bean catalogue had them in black.

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Last night the cook's trump card, so to speak, enraged Fiske to unusual heights. Praxades suggested that evenings be passed by rousing games of stud poker, using holy cards as chips. The silent Sister Xavier grinned. Leon always looked happy, as though her features were incapable of any other expression. Fiske sprang to her feet, hands clenched by her sides, her complexion red; she'd flung her book to the floor. She sputtered, "You . . . you . . . you sacrilegious old fool, you disgusting—"

"Enough," interrupted Reverend Mother, a regal lift to her chin. "Sister Praxades, hold your tongue. Sister Fiske, you allow the cook to bait you every evening. Both of you must learn control and tolerance." However, Reverend Mother's eyes held a glitter of amusement; not, I'm sure, because of Fiske's fury but because of the cook's inane ideas.

Smug satisfaction brightened Praxades's plump face. Fiske retrieved *The Lives of the Saints,* touched the cover to her lips in apology—to the book, which must have been blessed—and returned to her chair, hands trembling. I felt the heat of her hate for the cook, an emotion as searing as any that had touched me in the cities. It is Lent, weeks of sacrifice in preparation for Easter, but she definitely wasn't offering up her aggravation to the Lord. Fiske even lacked the control to school her expression. She darted a withering, mean look at Reverend Mother, then dropped her gaze to her book. Her face was murderous.

The fork in my hand stops scooping out the tuna. An uneasy resonance jingles in my mind. Had Fiske looked surprised at Reverend Mother's dire announcement? I recall only Fiske's disapproving expression over Gabrielle's outburst.

Perhaps Fiske had nothing to be surprised about.

Fiske, while not a physician, plays the part of one by doling out medications. In my habit's pocket, my fingers clutch the containers of pills. No one would know if they had been tampered with. No one, that is, except for Fiske.

No, I think, please. Not here.

Not again.

Reverend Mother imposes an afternoon of silence in memory of the cook. When I enter her office and request permission to speak, she signs, "later." Minutes afterward, swaddled in my anorak, I tromp through the barn, chickens squawking in terror, and exit by the rear door. If Praxades was disoriented by medica-

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tion, probably Fiske had to lead her outside. Snow squeaks like plastic pellets under my boots. Wind whips up millions of grains as fine as baby powder, shoving me nearly off my feet. My polarized lenses fog. I push the goggles above my eyes with awkward mittens and squint. The body is gone. While I was sequestered in the kitchen, the nuns moved the cook.

The day's dilute glow is muted by dark-bellied clouds, and though I search, crouching near the ground, crabwalking the path, there's no evidence that anyone has been here: not the dead cook, not the nuns, and—as I look at ground near my boots—not even Sister Ellen. The harsh land of winter has wiped away the traces. A spasm of shivering makes my jaw muscles tremble. I straighten. Abruptly a gale whites out the world and my name floats through the whirl: *"Ellen."*

I pivot, pulse galloping, half-expecting to see Praxades levitating from the ground. That movement is a dangerous mistake. The wind increases, howling and spinning drifts, shoving so hard that I stagger. The mad swirl of snow is blinding. Panic shoots through my very core, more invasive than the cold. Which way is the barn? How long have I been out here? Two minutes? Three? Already my fingers are deadened, ice freezing together my eyelashes, narrowing my view to thin, blurry slits.

I must move. My feet stumble, forcing my body against the wind, and again I hear my name, swallowed by the squall, but definitely from my left. If I'm hallucinating, if hypothermia is creating a false call, then I'm dead. I fight, moving to my left for an eternity of seconds; finally arms grab and pull me into the thick smell and chicken cackles of the barn. Violent shivers drop me to my knees on the straw. The door latch clunks closed. My rescuer drags me to the heat of the wood stove.

My gloves are pulled off, then the liners, and my frozen fingers are clasped in hands so warm they burn my flesh. When the ice melts from my lashes, I'm staring into the kind, silent face of Sister Xavier. I know her the least, yet I know this: She will perform extra penance for the sin of breaking silence when she called my name.

In the infirmary, I proffer Sister Praxades's medicines. Fiske's cold fingers remove the bottles from my palm.

I speak, violating the imposed quiet. "Why would Sister Praxades go outside?"

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The woman is still a moment, studying me, and the intensity of her stare and the knowledge of my scars makes my cheeks warm. Then she shrugs, a who-knows gesture. That motion is a lie. I feel her dissembling, controlling body language. She walks across the rough brick floor, twirling her robes in the way that Praxades mocked. For a moment the mirrored cabinet bounces her image at me, then her double swings away as she opens the cabinet. I follow. "The cook was fine last night. What would make her do such a thing?"

Fiske ignores me, reads the label on one vial, and places it on a shelf cabinet. In my cell, under my pallet, is a list of the prescriptions and one pill from each container. Feeble evidence. The thought strikes me that if Fiske decides to remove any other thorn in her side, by persisting like this, I'm making Sister Ellen the next likely target. Fiske's pinched face last night rises to mind, her seething fury at the cook . . . and, now I recall, toward Reverend Mother.

Anger, however, isn't an omen of murder. "What do you think caused her odd behavior?" I ask, observing her profile as she shelves the remaining vials. "The mix of drugs she'd been taking?"

Her lips curl slightly in contempt. This impugning of her medical care prompts her to talk. "Not at all."

During the next pause, I expect her to announce that Praxades was befuddled by a stroke or low blood sugar. Instead, she closes the wall cabinet. I'm careful not to look into the mirror. Fiske says, "Separation from God."

"What?"

"That's what killed your precious Sister Praxades."

She turns in a flair of robes and for a moment a silly picture forms, a ballet of nuns in long black habits. I catch her by the arm. With slow disdain, she rotates her head to fix a dark gaze on my hand. I don't let go. "She . . . you're saying she died from, what, weak faith? *That's* your clinical diagnosis?"

She raises her eyes to meet mine. Behind thick lenses her irises glint as though forged of hard, shiny metal. "No, Sister Ellen. That's my spiritual diagnosis."

Our gazes lock. I almost do the thing that I vowed never to do again under any circumstances: invade the mind of another.

If I forcibly examine her thoughts, she will know. They always knew. The last time I used this accursed ability, I destroyed everyone around me.

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Fiske stares, a smirking, superior look. It strikes me that she knows all about me, but that's impossible. Her hands shape the words *Look, Files, Top, Ellen.* With a nod she indicates the tall file cabinet.

I release Fiske. She strides away, footfalls slapping the brick floor, and exits the infirmary. As I look at the file cabinet, my stomach clenches in sudden, inexplicable fear. I, of all people, understand that some things are better left alone. Yet minutes later I have scanned the thick files bearing my name. Everything is there: the *Journal of the American Medical Association* study about a woman with provable telepathy; the Duke University professor's interview in *People* magazine and a photo of me hooked to an EEG machine; the *Newsweek* and *Time* articles about my assisting with various murder investigations nationwide; the *New York Times* report about how Gardini the Magician, a debunker of so-called psychics, finally paid a quarter of a million dollars to a bona fide mind-reader.

Dozens of newspaper and magazine articles cover the famous psychic's last murder case: Psychic's Husband and Brother Guilty of Business Partner's Murder. Then the same grainy photograph shows up in report after report: my disfigured features after the men my brother hired attacked me with acid. Long before that, though, everyone I came into contact with was leery of me. And weeks before acid ate away my features, I decided never again to snare thoughts from another's mind. After plastic surgeons had done the best they could with flesh that scarred so badly, I sought anonymity, a location where my history and notoriety might be unknown, where I might find, if not peace, at least isolation.

I thought that the nuns hadn't questioned me about my past or my scars due to their otherworldliness. Now I see that they had no need to interview me.

I stand in front of the infirmary mirror, holding the heavy file and gazing at my wretched reflection.

During dinner, while heads bend over a surprisingly tasty tuna casserole, first Leon, then Reverend Mother read passages from the Bible. Dinners are a time to fortify our bodies and our spirits. Reverend Mother, now at the podium, chooses the verses describing Jesus walking on the sea. The expressions of Leon, Xavier, Reverend Mother, and Gabrielle—especially Gabrielle

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—are serious and downcast. Fiske, to my eye, appears artificially solemn. I swallow a second helping of casserole, eager for the meal to end so that I can interrogate Leon over the dishes. After a minute, the only sound of fork against plate is my own. I look up. Fiske, Xavier, Gabrielle, and Leon are rapt with attention on Reverend Mother. She reads:

> "But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, 'Lord, save me!'
>
> "And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' "

Reverend Mother closes the Bible, kisses the gold-embossed cover, and returns to her place at the table. Everyone resumes eating, but something has happened which I've missed. The heavy cloud of their mood has lifted. On a psychological level, the dim dining room is bright.

In the cavern, Leon and I wear headlamps to light our way to the spring. The earth-generated heat keeps the temperatures from dropping below fifty, yet the high humidity is chilling. The damp mist blurs her shape and when our buckets accidentally clang together as we walk, my pulse jumps. She appears comfortable with how the cook died. She explains that Sister Praxades was moved to a mining shaft north of the barn. After leaving the corpse, they barricaded the entrance. When the ground thaws and, with the approval of the medical examiner—from two-hundred-mile-away Lygon—and Praxades' relatives, a burial plot will be prepared. Until then, her body will remain frozen and will be safe from the occasional arctic fox.

Her chipper tone nonpluses me. She might be discussing the disposal of the goat. We reach the pool and kneel down to draw water. I ask, "Why can't we have a memorial service now?"

"To mourn her would be to question God's will."

I set my full bucket down impatiently; water sloshes over the lip. "Leon, *talk* to me."

The desperation in my voice must have moved her. She sets her pail next to mine and says, "Of course I miss Sister Praxades. She brought this place alive. She made us laugh." Through the steam I see her grin. "Well, everyone except Sister Fiske," Leon

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amends. "Ellen, look at it this way. If you died, would you want those you love to feel grief, to suffer over losing you?"

I wouldn't. Still, I'm troubled by the acceptance of the cook's death. Even the elderly Gabrielle appears adjusted to her friend's absence, though perhaps that's not true. She might be numb with grief.

Leon places her hand on my shoulder. In the steam, her headlamp creates a bright halo. "Perhaps it's easier for us. Our beliefs treat death as a natural part of the soul's journey. It wouldn't make sense for us to behave as though Sister Praxades is gone forever."

I wish I believed in the immortality of the soul. "What if Fiske messed with Praxades's medication?"

Leon is quiet a moment. I know I've surprised her. "I guarantee that Sister Fiske is innocent of everything except anger. She's devoted to safeguarding our health, not endangering it."

Leon could probably find good in Judas. We trudge back through the tunnel toward the living quarters. An aura radiates from her, and in that aura three words ring over and over: JesusMaryJoseph.

I assume the duties of the cook, though joy has evaporated for me. The others appear inexplicably cheered, except for Reverend Mother, who wears a preoccupied expression as though straining to hear a faint voice just beyond the audible range. A snowstorm blankets the grounds with one foot, then two feet of powder. I watch Fiske, who ignores me. The weather rages and we turn inward; the times of silence are natural for them. This spiritual hibernation makes me edgy, though my bread-baking improves. Two days pass.

On the third morning, Gabrielle vanishes.

I sleep. I wake with a start, furious with my failed vigil. Today Leon, Xavier, and I searched outside for Gabrielle, but our efforts were thwarted by the storm's bluster. She disappeared in the night, like Praxades. The spirits of the nuns are visibly leadened, even Fiske's. My mind is groggy; confused speculations stick in my skull. Why is everyone so resigned about Praxades, now Gabrielle? Why does Reverend Mother appear fatigued? She walks hesitantly, as if movement is an effort. Is Fiske poisoning Reverend Mother? Has Fiske killed Gabrielle?

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A distant sound travels from the corridor. I sit up. Was that the timbers creaking? I toss off the comforter; chill seeps through my habit, cold slipping like spiders under the thermal underwear. In a few seconds I light the hurricane lamp, pull on my insulated boots, and tiptoe into the dark hall. All but one of the cell doors are closed. I peer into that room and my candlelight glows on an empty pallet. Seeing the tidy vacant room is a blow. I run to the kitchen, the dining room, the infirmary, the sitting room, the chapel, my search as fruitless as I feared. At the entryway door, I yank on anorak, gloves, cap and let myself out into the clear, breezy night, the cold so sharp my lungs inhale reflexively with the shock. It is always like this after a storm, as though fierce weather hones winter to better express its nature. The northerly has swept the entryway clear of all but a half-foot of powder, though drifts smooth the side wall clear up to the eaves. I round the building and find wind and deep snow . . . and heartache.

A figure glows in the frosty moonlight, skin gleaming whitely, a wide sweep of back and jiggling buttocks. "Leon!" I cry. She turns, a statue of salt, merging into the colorless world except for dark thatches of hair at crotch and head. My boots sink deep into the fresh powder as I struggle to her side.

"Please don't worry," Leon said. "I have faith." Syllables slur from frozen lips. "I'm getting warmer. My feet—"

"Leon, for the love of God, *please.*" Unshed tears chill my eyes. "You're not getting warmer. You're freezing."

My own face is ice. My stiff fingers won't grip. I loop my arm under hers and guide her toward the building. She resists; her red-lashed eyes blink sleepily under the narcotic of hypothermia.

"Damn you, Leon, *walk.*"

Her pale mouth opens in a semblance of a smile, the muscles of her jaw stiff with cold. "I'm walking, Ellen," she mumbles. "I'll come back. Reverend Mother did." Her arm slips like mist from mine and she stumbles away, wading through fresh snow, moving with a speed I wouldn't have thought possible. But she is numb. My legs drag through thigh-deep drifts and, trailing her, I fall, flounder deep in powdery whiteness. My freezing arms thrash for purchase in a substance as unstable as flour. Snow blankets my vision. I regain my footing, breathing hard, brushing ice from my face. Every muscle trembles so violently, my

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body straining to produce heat, that I can barely stand. I am alone in a landscape as pale and barren as the moon, and I suddenly understand who the murderer is.

I race through the corridor to Reverend Mother's room and enter without knocking, throat parched from cold and panic. A single candle flickers from the floor. Reverend Mother lies on her bed in full habit, fingers laced at her waist, thick black socks on her feet. The down comforter and blankets have been kicked to the floor. I lean over her. "I don't know what rot you've been telling these women, but Leon's out there and you're going to help me get her inside. If she hears you calling, she'll come in." Part of me says it's already too late for Leon, but I can't listen to that.

Reverend Mother stares at me, eyes glittering as though a fire blazes inside her skull. "It's Lent. The Lord calls her. She's being tested."

I pull her to a sitting position and her heat radiates like a furnace. Fever has glossed her skin with perspiration. "This is not Christ asking the apostles to walk on water, damn it. This is Alaska and she'll die out there. No one can survive that cold."

Her hands clutch my shoulders with a frenzied strength. "I did."

An odor pierces my hysteria, a fetid smell. It isn't a chamber-pot stink, but a scent of putrefaction and decay. With horror, I look at her feet, which she suddenly tucks under her skirts, a childlike gesture. I pull back the material. She isn't wearing thick, dark socks; frost-bitten toes and heels have swelled, rotted, and blackened. I slide up the polypro of her long underwear. Dark streaks on the calves disappear under the fabric, infection spreading toward her groin. Sickened, I cover her legs. Reverend Mother lies back against her pallet, and whispers a few words in German, the gist of which I understand. "Yes," I nod sadly, "you have faith."

The pilot and I haven't spoken. I'm his only passenger and wear heavy, insulated ear muffs to dull the engine noise; conversation is impossible. I'm also wearing a thin gauze mask that Sister Xavier fashioned at my request before I left the cloister. The pilot didn't ask about it. He probably thinks the mask is a religious garment. Below us is Anchorage, refreshingly green in its springtime mantle.

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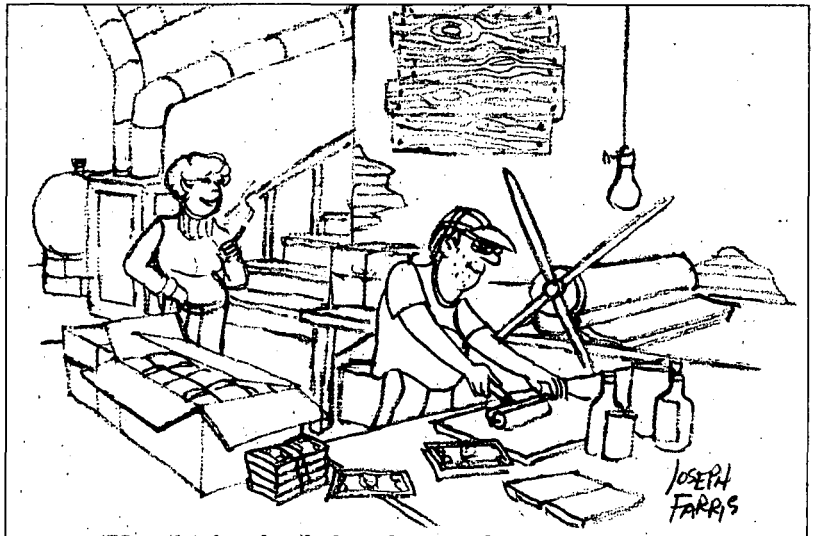
Xavier and I hunted but never found Leon's body. We speculated that she must have entered an abandoned mine shaft. After the start of the thaw, I found Gabrielle not far from the tunnel where the others had barricaded Praxades, and where we had entombed the corpse of Reverend Mother. I spent the last four months meditating on my own considerable responsibility in these terrible deaths. At first I raged at the twisted beliefs that corralled this small, insular society into suicidal behaviors. After talking awhile with Fiske and Xavier, though, I saw that I could have played a part in bringing a sort of heathen reasoning to their lives. However, my goal was self-protection and isolation, not involvement. Perversely, I managed to neither protect myself nor remain uninvolved. Guilt will always reside within me, a hard, frozen shard of northern Alaska.

After the pilot lands, I step down from the plane, pull the mask below my chin, and walk toward the terminal.

Travelers at the airport stare, but I've taken a gift—and a lesson—from my months in the cloister. In my soul spreads a vast emptiness, images and ideas bright stars with light-years of distance in between. ●



"Your high school class knew what it was saying when it predicted you'd make the most money."

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THE JINGLE BOX

by Donald Olson

"She's only a nurse," Ida kept telling him. "You've surely known enough nurses not to be intimidated by my own sister-in-law."

Courtney had told her, shortly after they'd met, that he'd moved to the desert to recover from the effects of a lengthy debilitating illness. That Ida's sister-in-law Colleen was a nurse did not worry him; that she was a nurse at the prison did, the same prison from which he'd escaped after serving ten years of his sentence for robbing a Las Vegas bank, a robbery in which his partner had shot and killed a young bank guard.

The theme of transformation appears again and again in crime fiction: the ordinary Joe turned into a ruthless killer by a turn of fate; the con softened by a kind word. At the heart of our criminal justice system is a belief in the mutability of the prisoners who filter through it, even if we're sceptical in our bones. It's terrific material for a crime writer, especially one like Donald Olson, who'll keep you guessing till the end. ✝

For twenty-five years after his escape Courtney had wandered about the country, forming no close relationships and always pining for the desert country he loved, yet never daring to go back until time and life had so changed his appearance he felt it safe to take the risk.

Plato Switch suited him admirably, a dusty flyspeck of a town some sixty miles southwest of Vegas, a town where burned-out senses and wasted bodies might recover, if it was not too late, from the ravages of the lifestyle that had landed Courtney behind bars at the age of thirty. His scant hair had turned white, he was all bones and baggy flesh, and he often still moved with the shuffling gait of a convict.

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Courtney Lynn, the name he'd adopted, had a mild, inoffensive ring about it and gradually he'd begun to adapt to life in the small desert community; he'd even joined a church where at bingo he'd met Ida Starkweather, a bouncy gray-haired widow who was all that is virtuous, respectable, proper, and seemly in a woman, a far cry from the bawdy party girls of his distant past. As their regard for each other deepened he'd begun to believe that Fate, which too often had played him for a sucker, was prepared to balance the scales.

If only he could set his mind at rest about Colleen, who was about to pay them a visit.

"You did say Colleen has worked at the prison for twenty-eight years, didn't you, my love?"

"How many times must I tell you that?" Ida gently chided him.

Twenty-eight years. Meaning she'd been there when Courtney was still an inmate. He didn't recall, despite the many occasions he'd spent in the prison hospital, ever meeting a nurse named Colleen Starkweather, but then his memory was not that reliable. And really, why worry, he tried to tell himself. Chances were all but nil she'd be able to recognize him after all these years.

This thought was going through his mind as he stood regarding himself in the mirror over the mantel in the living room of Ida's house. Glancing up from the tea set she was arranging, Ida rebuked him with a laugh.

"Stop fretting, dear. You look fine now I've fattened you up. And I just know you and Colleen will hit it off fine. I've told her all about you on the phone. She's always been urging me to marry again."

"It's not that," he said. "I was just thinking what a dirty trick time plays on us. If you'd known me when I was young you'd never believe it was the same crittur."

"Tell me about it, I could write the book. I know all too well what time does to us."

But not what *doing* time does to us, he reflected grimly, wishing his own strength of character were equal to Ida's. He truly hated the thought of stepping into marriage with that dark cloud of mendacity hanging over them. Now, suddenly overcome with contempt for his own moral cowardice, he turned from the mirror and spoke solemnly to Ida.

"Sweetheart, I've got to talk to you."

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He shook his head as she patted the sofa cushion beside her, settling himself stiffly on the chair opposite. "There's something I want you to know before Colleen gets here. Something that might change your mind about hitching up with me."

Her sweetly angelic smile acquired a shade of concern. "What is it, dear? You aren't unwell, are you?"

"No, no, but I've not been completely on the level with you about my past."

Ida reproached him with a vigorous shake of her head. "Hold it right there, mister. You know the rules. We agreed never to talk about the past. What matters is now, today, and however many tomorrows the good Lord will bless us with."

"But Ida, the past is part of us, of what we are."

"Of what we've *been,* you mean. Sakes alive, I'm no more the silly goose I was at sixteen than you're—well, let's just say I don't give a hoot if maybe you weren't the living symbol of the Boy Scouts of America when you were in knickers."

"I wasn't thinking quite that far back," he replied. "What if I'd done something really bad when I was old enough to know better?"

"In that case, yours truly would hardly be the one to pass judgment."

"Come on, you've never done anything really bad in your whole life."

Ida looked beyond him, the shadow of an old pain dulling her smile. "I suppose not many folks would think it so bad nowadays, life being what it is, but not so many years ago it was a different story. I was madly in love with a young man, couldn't wait to get married. No one knew I was going to have his baby. We planned to get married before anyone found out. But then he died. I was heartbroken. Well, there was this other fellow who was crazy about me. Ray Starkweather. I agreed to marry him. But then I miscarried. Ray was good to me, and I did my best to make him a good wife. And his sister Colleen's been ever so nice to me. So there, see. I wasn't always such an angel."

This open, artless confession should perhaps have inspired Courtney to be as frank with Ida, but suddenly, unaccountably, his resolve crumbled. Getting pregnant before you were married could hardly be morally equated with robbing a bank at gunpoint, escaping from prison, and living as a fugitive for over twenty years. No, not the same thing at all. He knew all at once

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that he dared not take the risk of telling her, of possibly losing her. Theirs had been the only caring relationship he'd ever enjoyed. He couldn't take the chance of its being destroyed only for the sake of clearing his conscience. She must never know what he'd done.

"Now I've gone and broken my own rule," Ida said briskly, pouring out the tea, "but we'll have no more talk about the past, yours or mine. That's final. Here, have a peanut butter cookie, and wipe that sad-dog look off your face."

Courtney walked home to his roominghouse embittered by having proved his own moral weakness and wondering if Fate would punish him for it. Perhaps he was only deluding himself, falsely imagining his physical appearance had changed to the extent where Colleen Starkweather couldn't possibly recognize him.

He lay awake picturing that first face-to-face meeting with Ida's sister-in-law and her astonishment upon recognizing the escaped prisoner. "Ida!" he could hear her cry out. "I know this man. His name isn't Lynn, it's Frank Boyd Carmichael. He's been wanted by the police for twenty-five years. He's a bank robber."

Lying there in the darkness with the cold white face of the moon glaring at him through the window, he wondered if it would not be wiser to pack his bag in the morning and hit the road again, maybe go back East, resume that life of aimless, loveless wandering he'd endured for so many years, not to take the risk of ruining Ida's life as well as his own.

Dawn swept these pessimistic thoughts from his mind and left him seeking a more practical solution to his problem, such as inventing a way to prevent the meeting with Colleen from taking place. He was forced to scrap one idea after another until, while shaving, a quite different plan occurred to him, one both risky and audacious but which would at least free him from the misery of suspense and spare him the humiliation, should worse come to worst, of having his real identity disclosed in Ida's presence.

He had Colleen's phone number and address tucked away in his wallet, given to him by Ida in case an emergency required him to contact her sister-in-law in a hurry. Before going to Ida's for Sunday dinner he stopped at the room across the hall and asked to use his neighbor's phone.

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"Colleen? It's Courtney Lynn, Ida's friend."

"Well, surprise, surprise." Her voice was all lightness and warmth at first, and then: "Oh gosh, nothing's wrong, is there? Ida's okay?"

"Fine, yes, fit as a fiddle. Listen, Colleen, I don't want Ida to know I called you, so it's our little secret, okay?"

"You sure nothing's wrong?"

"No, really. Reason I'm calling is that I've got to run up to Vegas tomorrow and would like to stop by and say hello if it wouldn't be inconvenient."

"Not at all. Matter of fact, Monday's my day off. What time should I expect you?"

"Noonish, I should think."

"Good. I'll give you lunch."

Pleased with the plan so far, even if somewhat leery about visiting a town so close to the prison from which he'd escaped, Courtney arrived at Ida's feeling a sense of immense relief.

"So why can't I come with you?" Ida asked when he told her he had to drive up to Vegas for the day.

"Because you're the reason I'm going, sweetheart. I've got some very special shopping to do and I don't want you looking over my shoulder."

"I promise I won't. Let me go with you."

"Nope, not this time. Make you a promise, though. After tomorrow I'll never go anywhere without you by my side."

"You're sweet," she cooed, and with a kiss gave him her car keys.

The small town where Colleen Starkweather lived was only about two miles east of the prison. Surprisingly, the nearer Courtney got the less fidgety he felt, the more confident he grew that even had he been visiting Colleen at the prison itself, no one would connect him with the escapee who had vanished all those years ago. Not that for a moment would he have dreamed of venturing such a risk.

This air of confidence evaporated, however, as he drove into the town and started looking for Colleen's address. He had to face the possibility, remote as it was, that he might only be fooling himself and that something in his eyes or his voice or even in the way he moved might trigger a recollection in Colleen's mind of an inmate she had ministered to in the prison hospital. He had to decide what to do were that to happen.

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What *could* he do, aside from denying he was Frank Boyd Carmichael? As far as he could see, only two courses of action could be taken should things go wrong: beat a hasty retreat, jump back in the car, and keep driving until once again the desert was only a memory. Never see Ida again. Become once more an aging, lonely fugitive with nothing to look forward to but decline and death among strangers.

He tried to avoid thinking about the second possible course of action, one that only a desperate and violent man would even contemplate. He could hardly deny that violence had once been part of his nature, but those days were gone; body, soul, and mind belonged to a different person altogether.

On the other hand, suppose he was forced to make a choice between losing Ida or removing from his life the one threat to her happiness, and his own. Would he have the strength of will to take that desperate measure? If something happened to Colleen, if something *had* to happen to Colleen to seal her lips, no one could possibly link him with her death—or to the "accident" it might appear to have been.

Courtney forced this monstrous thought from his mind. Nothing like that would happen. Nothing like that need happen. Colleen would greet a stranger at her door, a stranger bearing no resemblance to anyone she'd ever met before.

He held this thought firmly in mind as he rang the doorbell of the small bungalow on Sierra Drive and fixed a smile on his face as the door was opened.

Her first inquiring glance betrayed nothing to alarm Courtney. Colleen Starkweather was a slim, well-groomed woman in her late forties, with that certain air of confident independence one usually marked in teachers, nurses, and other professional women living alone and dedicated to their work.

She smiled and offered her hand. "You must be Courtney. I'm so glad we meet at last. Ida's told me all about you."

"Pleased to meet you, Colleen."

"Come in. Everything's in rather a muddle, I'm afraid. One of those days, you know." She kept chattering as she led him into a small, well-furnished living room. "It's *supposed* to be my day off, but wouldn't you know, I got a call from the prison. The other nurse had some sort of emergency crop up and they want me to come in. Lunch is out, I'm afraid, but let me give you a drink at least after your long drive."

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Courtney hadn't felt this good since the day he'd escaped from prison. He was in the clear. Colleen didn't recognize him; he was a stranger to her. As he accepted the cold beer she offered him he breathed a silent prayer of gratitude.

"No harm would've been done if I'd missed you," he said. "I just figured it would be nice to get acquainted before you visit us next weekend. Break the ice, you know."

"You really had me worried there. I'm awfully fond of Ida, she's like a real sister to me. Neither of us has anyone else. Sorry. She has *you* now, and I couldn't be happier about it."

"Neither could I," he replied, sipping his beer and feeling doubly grateful that the visit must be brief, with no time for Colleen, were she to be so inclined, to ask embarrassing questions about his past. "I thought I'd run up to Vegas and pick up a nice ring for Ida. She said she didn't want a ring, but it wouldn't be a proper engagement without one."

Colleen nodded approvingly. "Ida was never the one for material things. One of her many virtues."

Courtney said he wished he were able to offer Ida more than he could but his life had been a bumpy ride and he'd been in poor health for a number of years. "I just want you to know I love Ida dearly and will do my darnedest to make her happy."

"I'm sure you will."

He said something about not wanting to hold her up, and thanking her for the beer, rose to depart, vastly reassured by the success of his visit.

Only when Colleen was saying goodbye at the door did she drop, if not exactly a bombshell, a remark that produced a palpable jolt.

"We've never met before, have we, Courtney?"

He held on to his smile. "You and me? No, I'm sure we haven't."

"No, of course not. Just for a second there I thought there was something vaguely familiar about you."

"Most of us old codgers look alike to the young."

She roared at this. "*Young?* Now that was gallant. I can see why Ida fell for you. I'll look forward to a nice long visit next weekend. Sorry we can't have longer now."

"No problem, Colleen. It'll give me more time in Vegas."

That casual remark about his looking vaguely familiar somewhat dampened Courtney's mood as he drove away, yet all

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things considered, the visit had not proved unsatisfactory. He no longer viewed the coming weekend with alarm.

His luck held for the rest of that day and he regarded it as a good omen when his modest flyer at the crap table in Vegas won him enough to buy Ida a more expensive ring than he'd planned.

"Oh, you wicked, lovely man!" cried Ida when he put the ring on her finger. "If I'd known what you were up to I'd have put my foot down."

"Better hold on to that ring," he teased. "Might be the only thing I'll ever be able to buy for you."

The ensuing week was one of the happiest in Courtney's life. He felt as if he'd challenged Fate to a game of chance and beaten the odds. For the first time he knew what was meant by the spirit of contentment, and like most of the happy and carefree weeks of one's life, this one passed swiftly; it was soon the eve before Colleen's visit.

"Seems a bit foolish," observed Ida, "couple our age throwing an engagement party." She'd invited a few friends from the church to join them.

"I don't agree," said Courtney, polishing the wineglasses, very fine wine glasses and like everything in Ida's house, having the look of something treasured over the years. It would be untrue to suggest that Courtney was marrying Ida for her money, she was anything but rich, and yet secretly, deep down inside, he took pleasure in knowing his final years would be amply provided for. From having thought of himself as one of fortune's victims, he had come to regard himself as one of its late-blooming favorites. A very lucky man.

"I hope your sister-in-law won't turn out to be the nosy sort," said Courtney. "There's precious few things in my life I can boast about."

"Don't you worry. Colleen knows how I feel about the past. She won't pry. If she does I'll soon put a stop to it."

As it happened, Colleen could not have been a more charming and agreeable guest. When she did ask a question, seemingly in all innocence and without any malice or curiosity, Courtney, who had always been a better liar than bank robber, was able to satisfy her without sounding evasive. And, most likely to spare him embarrassment, she did not allude to Ida's past, to Ray Starkweather, or indulge in any family gossip, always so boring to those unfamiliar with the people under discussion. She

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told a few amusing stories about her work as a nurse at the prison hospital but did not dwell on the subject. All in all, the weekend proved a resounding success.

As Colleen was preparing to leave late on Sunday, she asked Courtney where he and Ida were going on their honeymoon. Ida giggled. "Now stop making fun of us, Colleen. Any honeymoon we have will be right here."

"Don't be too sure," said Courtney. "Depends on what we find when we open the jingle box."

Colleen looked at him. "Jingle box?"

"That's what my dear old dad called our piggy bank. Open the jingle box, sonny, and see if we can afford it, he'd say."

"How cute."

As soon as they'd waved goodbye to Colleen they went back in the house where Ida sank into a chair and shut her eyes.

"You okay, sweetheart?" said Courtney. "Sit right there and I'll do the washing up."

"No you won't, and neither will I. I'm all tuckered out. I'll take care of it tomorrow. If you don't mind, all I want is my bed."

When Ida used that tone of voice Courtney knew better than to argue, she used it so seldom. He kissed her goodnight and walked home whistling "Mexicali Rose."

On the following morning when Courtney was leaving his roominghouse, savoring the thought of a hearty breakfast, as was his custom, at the nearby Silver Slipper Cafe, two police officers with drawn guns accosted him. One of them uttered the fatal message:

"Frank Boyd Carmichael, you are under arrest," and he proceeded to read the stunned and aging escapee his rights.

He saw Ida only once more in his life, when she paid him a visit shortly after his incarceration, prompted to do so by a letter he'd written her.

"I just wanted to tell you to your face," she said, "you were wrong about Colleen. She didn't turn you in. I did."

"I don't believe you," he said flatly, searching her unforgiving eyes for a sign of something, anything that would put the lie to her words.

"I'm sorry I had to do it. I owed it to Ralph."

His blank expression brought a flush of anger to her powder-puff cheeks. "You probably don't even remember his name.

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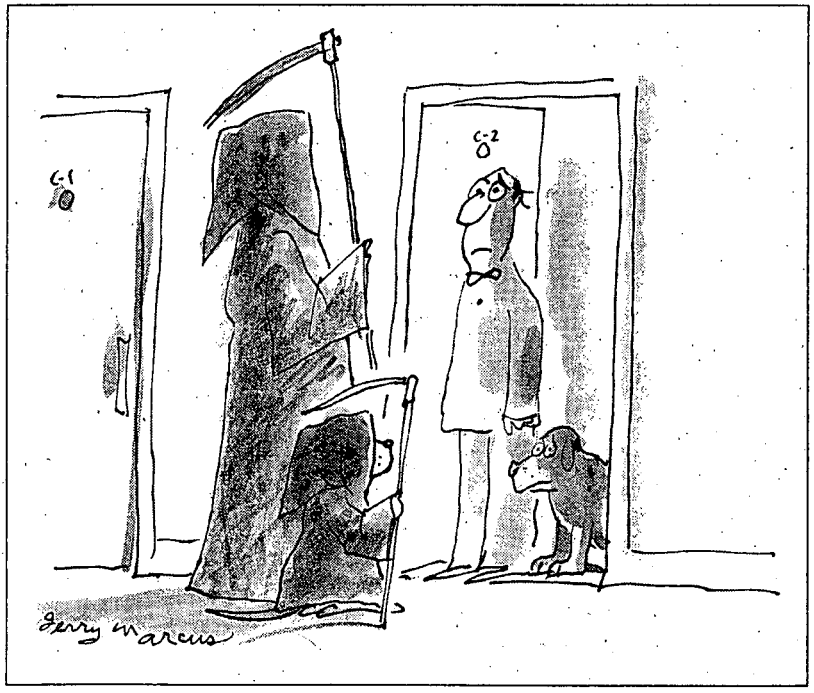
Ralph Austin, the bank guard your partner shot and killed when you robbed that Vegas bank twenty-five years ago. He was my fiancé. My unborn baby's father."

Courtney opened his mouth but no words came.

"I was a teller," she continued in the same dull tone, "in that bank when it happened. A pretty young woman then. But time changes us, doesn't it? Not surprising you didn't recognize me when we met at bingo in the church parlor. Any more than I recognized you. Until Colleen came to visit and you were talking that nonsense about a honeymoon. You used a certain expression, remember? Minute I heard those words I suddenly *knew*. I remembered the tone of your voice, the look in your eyes. Have you forgotten what you said to that teller, that pretty young girl, when you demanded money? I haven't forgotten. I never will."

She leaned closer to the partition, her eyes staring hard and straight into his.

"You said, 'Open the jingle box, baby, and hand me the cash.' " ●



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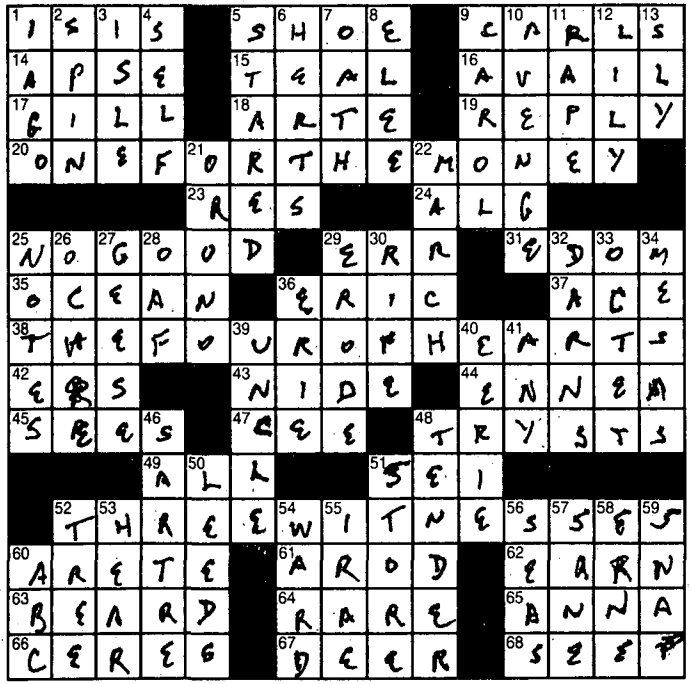
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Mystery Math

by Beth Allison



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26 Color on Agatha Troy's palette
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39 Patricia Moyes's *Death and the Dutch* ——
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Art by Ron Chironna

HIGH WATER

by Patrick Irelan

They found the body three days after the river crested, floating in the water behind John O'Donnell Stadium. Another victim of the flood: Harold Berg, fifty-two years old, two children, divorced, dead. I paid little attention. It was a big year for statistics, and I'd heard enough.

The day after the funeral, the phone rang. "Scofield Detective Agency," I said.

"Mr. Scofield?" a female voice said.

"Speaking."

"You don't know me, but I found your number in the yellow pages." Scofield's marketing blitz had paid off again.

"What can I do for you?"

"You may have read about Harold Berg in the papers."

"Yes."

"The police think he drowned accidentally, but I don't believe it. I was wondering if you could come to my house to talk about

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it. I'd rather not go to your office. Someone might see me and start asking questions."

I didn't tell her, but the chance of anyone seeing her going into my office was about as likely as strolling through LeClaire Park without getting your feet wet. I was the only tenant on the second floor of a run-down brick building at Fourth and Brady. The top floor of the three-story building had no tenants at all.

The woman said her name was Ingrid Larson, and I promised to come out that afternoon. After lunch at the Blackhawk Hotel, I climbed into my Chevy and drove out to northwest Davenport. It was raining, of course, and I couldn't find my umbrella. I'd already lost three since April.

Native Iowan Patrick Irelan has nearly completed a first novel featuring the flood-beset protagonist of "High Water," private eye Michael Scofield. Yet writing remains a part-time occupation for this author, who works as an editor for the University of Iowa's Division of Continuing Education and is the father of two girls. Mr. Irelan's short fiction has appeared in a variety of literary magazines; he plans to continue the Scofield series in both novels and stories. ¶

Ingrid Larson lived in a big limestone house on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi, up where levees aren't necessary but burglar alarms are. She led me into a front parlor where I could enjoy the view. I sat down on the couch. She sat down in a chair facing me and crossed her long, well-formed legs.

"This is Harold's house," she said, "in case you're wondering."

"I wonder about everything," I said. I looked around the room. The furniture was elegant, the rug Persian.

"Harold meant for me to have this house." I could understand that. Ingrid was tall and blond, with high cheekbones and sky-blue eyes. I guessed her age at twenty-nine or thirty. She was strong and healthy, and gave the impression that at any moment she might land her Viking longship on the coast of Ireland and slice up two or three villagers for lunch. "We planned to get married," she said, "but now this has happened. It seems like too much of a coincidence."

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"Why do you say that?"

"His kids hate me. They think I was after him just for his money. Now that he's dead, they figure they'll get the house."

"So you think they killed their father just for a house?"

"I'm not saying they killed him, but they might have done something. We would have gotten married in October. The flood made it look like an accident, but I'm not so sure."

"Did he know how to swim?"

"No, but he was always very cautious around water."

"What would he have been doing down by the river?"

"I don't know." She shook her head.

"Tell me who his kids are."

"Randy is the oldest. He's twenty-six. Tracy is twenty-four."

I was writing all this down in my notebook, as I often do. It makes me look as if I know what I'm doing. "Are they married?"

"No. They're both too immature to settle down."

"What makes you think they're so worried about your getting the house? Didn't their father leave them anything else?" I peered into her blue eyes. A man could drown in those eyes.

"Of course he did. He left them over three million each. He was very wealthy."

"Did he leave anything for you?"

"Only the money he gave me over the years. I saved most of it. It will give me a modest income." She brushed a piece of lint from her skirt.

"But not enough for a place like this," I said, looking around. Scofield knows how to get to the core of the matter.

"That's right. That's why I need the house. They don't need it. They both have plenty of money. They'd just sell it anyway, but I'd have to move into a dinky apartment. They want to kick me out just to spite me. Randy even called before the funeral and told me I had two weeks to get out."

"Have you contacted a lawyer?" I said.

"Yes," she said, "Robert Turner."

I knew Turner. He wouldn't fall asleep in court. "What does he plan to do?"

"He wants to show that Harold intended for me to have the house, since I already lived here and we were planning to get married. He meant to have that added to his will. Mr. Turner says anything I can offer as evidence of Harold's intentions will help. So I thought I should find out if Randy and Tracy tried to

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hide the truth or conspire against us in some way."

"And that's why you called me."

"Yes."

"I need to know a few things about you too, if you don't mind." She nodded. "What did you do before you met Harold?"

"I was a model." A model. I tried not to assume too much.

"Are you originally from Davenport?"

"Yes. I grew up in the West End." The West End was strictly working class. Poor but respectable in most parts. Poor but not respectable in some parts. I could understand why Ingrid didn't want to give up her big house with the nice view.

Before leaving, I asked her to lend me recent photographs of both Randy and Tracy Berg. She took a couple of pictures out of a drawer and handed them to me. Randy and Tracy were just as blond as Ingrid. With my brown hair and eyes, I felt like an outsider. "I'm in no hurry to get them back," she said. "Ever." I also got Randy and Tracy's phone numbers and addresses. They too lived above the flood plain. I wasn't surprised. Wealth is a great predictor of topography.

The rain was still falling. I drove back to the office and let myself in. There was only one room, so I didn't get lost. I took off my jacket, sat down, and called Randy Berg.

"Randy, this is Michael Scofield at the Scofield Detective Agency."

"Yes."

"One of my clients is concerned about the circumstances surrounding the death of your father."

"I'll bet. Your client wouldn't happen to be Ingrid Larson, would it?"

"You guessed it."

"Well, I'm concerned about my father's death, too. I told the police I think Ingrid may have killed him herself."

"And what did they say?"

"They're looking into it."

"I'm sure they are."

"I'll tell you exactly the same thing I told them." I hoped it wouldn't take long. The whine in his voice was making me cringe. "Ingrid Larson is a whore whose only interest in my father was his money. Do you know how she made a living before she met him?"

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"She said she was a model."

"That's a good one. She usually says she was a dancer. Would you like to know where she did her dancing?"

"Tell me."

"At the Gentlemen's Retreat."

The Gentlemen's Retreat stood on West Third Street in an area thriving with drug dealers and prostitutes. It wasn't the place to go if you wanted to see *Swan Lake*. "That doesn't mean she's a murderer," I said.

"Is that right? Well, you tell that whore that my sister and I want her to get out of our house." He hung up.

I pondered a moment, then dialed Tracy's number. The line was busy. I waited a few minutes and tried again.

"Hello," a woman's voice said.

"May I speak to Tracy Berg?"

"This is she."

"Tracy, this is Michael Scofield at the—" Click. Buzz. Must have been brother Randy on the line when I tried before. Someone had told Tracy to expect my call.

I looked up the number of Dr. James Cook, the county medical examiner. In addition to his job as medical examiner, Dr. Cook had a private practice. The woman who answered said he was taking out a boy's appendix and would have to call back later. That's the trouble with kids today. They have to have everything right now.

I dialed the number for Lieutenant Rocco at the Davenport Police Department. Rocco is the only cop in town I'm not afraid to call. He may not tell me anything, but at least he won't yell at me. He's a nice guy. He's also married to my sister Carolyn. Which is probably more important than the fact that he's a nice guy.

"Rocco," a voice said.

"Tony, this is Mike."

"Yeah?" He sounded harried.

"What do you know about Harold Berg's death?"

"Not much. There's not much to know."

"I'm working for Ingrid Larson. She thinks someone may have killed him, someone like his son or daughter. Or both."

"I know. She told me, at great length, complete with tears and eyelashes. Then an hour later the son told me he suspected her. That's all we have so far, lots of suspicion but no evidence."

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"How exactly did he die?"

"He drowned."

"Did he drown by accident or did someone help him?"

"All I know is he drowned. I have no evidence that anyone helped him along. That would've been a hard thing to do anyway. He was pretty big. He wouldn't just let someone hold his head under water. Now if you don't mind, I need to go." I thanked him for being so much help and hung up.

I pulled a Beck's Dark out of the fridge and settled into my swivel chair to stare at the vacant building across the street. That building held many secrets. I had no idea what they were, but I kept hoping for a revelation.

By four-thirty I had lined up five dead bottles, but the building had revealed nothing. I was giving serious thought to the question of dinner when the phone rang. It was Dr. Cook. "What can you tell me about the cause of Harold Berg's death?" I said.

"That's easy. He drowned. His lungs were full of water."

"Could someone have caused him to drown?"

"There's no evidence of it, no bruises or injuries sustained before death."

"What about suicide?"

"No reason to think that either. The best bet is accidental drowning. He got loaded, went down to the river, and fell in."

"Loaded?"

"That's right. He had almost as much alcohol in him as water."

I hoped he'd skip the lecture on alcohol abuse. "If he was that drunk, wouldn't it make it easier for someone to drown him and make it look like an accident?"

"It would make it easier, but not more likely. In all my years as medical examiner, I've never seen anyone murdered by drowning. It's not an efficient way to kill someone." He made it sound like selecting the best dishwasher. I said goodbye and went to dinner.

The morning after my meeting with Ingrid Larson, I ate breakfast at Vigo's Cafe. Vigo had held out against the rising water, and now that it was going down, he was enjoying the reward, a spotless interior and steady business. It's easier to fill and stack sandbags than it is to give in and clean up later. The health department won't let you just throw sawdust on top of the mud

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and pretend that nothing happened. You have to clean and sterilize everything.

I had spent one crucial night helping Vigo strengthen his dike, and in return he promised me a free breakfast every day until the river fell below flood stage. According to the latest measurements, I still had five feet of free breakfasts to go.

After thanking Vigo for his bacon and eggs, I drove up to McClellan Heights, a wealthy neighborhood high above the river on the east side of town. I parked a block from a Spanish Colonial-style house and settled down with my binoculars and a thermos of Vigo's coffee. By ten-thirty I had finished the coffee. At eleven o'clock it began to rain. Again. I loosened my tie.

By twelve-thirty it was still raining, and I was ready for a break. My stomach was empty and my bladder was full. I was about to start the engine and drive away when a big blond-haired man in a Mercedes-Benz pulled into the driveway. He walked up the sidewalk and went into the house. I caught a glimpse of someone meeting him at the door, probably Tracy. Maybe this big guy was her boyfriend.

I waited for something to happen. Nothing did. Something would, though, if I didn't find a john. I finally capitulated and drove to a gas station. By the time I got back, the Mercedes had disappeared. Now what? For all I knew, she had gone with him. I was probably watching an empty house. I turned on the radio and listened to the news. St. Louis was getting ready for a mud bath.

By two o'clock, I was ready to change jobs. My back hurt. My head ached. I was hungry. I was tired. At 2:05 Tracy Berg walked out of the house and got into a red Audi. All things come to him who waits.

She drove to the village of East Davenport, a trendy historic neighborhood facing the river. I followed along about two blocks behind. She parked on Eleventh Street, where it borders Lindsay Park, and walked into the Village Restaurant. I waited ten minutes and went inside, where I spotted her sitting alone at a table in the rear, eating a salad. She was slight and pretty, not gorgeous like Ingrid, but pretty. She had on a pair of Levi's, a golf shirt, and expensive running shoes.

She wouldn't talk to me on the phone, and I knew she wouldn't let me into her house, so this was probably the best I could hope for. I certainly didn't want to spend another day examining her

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stucco through my binoculars. I made my move.

"Hello," I said. "Mind if I join you?" I sat down across the table from her.

"Who are you?" she said.

"Mike Scofield." I held out my hand. She didn't take it.

"I have nothing to say to you." She stabbed a tomato slice but didn't put it into her mouth.

"You should. I might be able to help you."

"You're working for Ingrid. Why would you help me?"

"Because I want to find the truth, regardless of who pays me. If someone killed your father, I'd like to know who." She looked as if she almost believed me. "I'm not asking you to reveal any family secrets. I just need some basic information." This wasn't entirely true. I wanted all the family secrets I could get, but I was willing to settle for less.

The waitress appeared. I ordered a ham sandwich and a bottle of beer, and the waitress retreated toward the kitchen.

"What information?" Tracy said, putting the tomato slice, still impaled on the fork, back into the bowl.

"What do you know about the last day of your father's life?" I said.

"He was drinking, as usual. That's no family secret, by the way. Everyone knows he was an alcoholic."

"The medical examiner thinks he drowned by accident. Did he know how to swim?"

"No, but he knew how dangerous the river was. He lived here his whole life. That's why Randy and I think someone killed him, and who would want to besides Ingrid? She had the most to gain."

"I see what you mean." Scofield knows when to be agreeable. "Why would he go down to the river in the first place?"

"I don't know. Curiosity maybe."

"Did anyone see him down there before he drowned?"

"No. That Karl Huber guy said he did, but he was there the wrong night."

Karl Huber guy? I tried not to look surprised. "That's right," I said. "What do you know about him?"

"He called after they found my father's body. He said that he'd had a little accident in his car the night before, and he was out looking at the damage when he saw my father down by the river. Later he heard about what had happened and saw my father's

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picture on the news. He thought there would be some sort of reward, so he called Randy, and Randy called the police."

"Who did he talk to?"

"Lieutenant Rocco."

"Of course. Lieutenant Rocco."

"But then the man remembered it was another night."

"Another night. Too bad. Rocco must have been disappointed." The waitress returned and I poured my beer.

"Rocco, I know you're not obliged to tell me anything about a police investigation, but I could have used some help with this Karl Huber in the Berg case. Between friends, I mean." I was back in the office with the phone in my hand. "You know you can trust me, don't you?"

"Sure, Mike. I can trust you."

"Then why didn't you tell me about this witness?"

"Two reasons. First, it was police business and not yours. Second, the guy changed his story."

"How so? Just between you and me."

"Just between you and me, he originally said he had a little accident the night of July eleventh on East River Drive. When he got out to check the damage, he saw a man who looked like Berg down by the river with a woman. He also saw another man with them. The next day he saw Berg's picture on television and called the family. Then Randy Berg called me. You following this, Mike?"

"Sure thing, Tony." I ignored his sarcasm. "So how did Huber change his story?"

"The day after I talked to him, I called him back to double-check what he'd told us. He immediately started saying he'd made a mistake. Everything had happened just as he said, except it happened the night of July tenth, not July eleventh. I pressed him on this, but he said he was sure. Said he'd been confused at first about his dates. Anyway, this made his information irrelevant. We know Berg was alive until at least the evening of the eleventh. Plenty of witnesses saw him during the day and others saw him at dinner that night."

"So do you believe him? Did he really get the date wrong or did someone pay him to get it wrong?"

"I don't know. Frankly, the guy didn't seem very bright. It's possible he just made a mistake. He says that's all that happened. Just a mistake."

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After talking to Rocco, I dialed Karl Huber's number. The woman who answered said Karl would get home from work about five-thirty. I looked at my watch. Four o'clock. Plenty of time to have a few beers and watch the rain at Fourth and Brady.

Karl Huber lived in an old frame house on West Second Street, three blocks north of the factories, canneries, and packing plants on Rockingham Road, one of which I assumed he worked in. The house needed new shingles and a coat of paint.

I arrived fifteen minutes early to have a chat with the Mrs. The Mrs. was short, round, and about fifty years old. She had stringy gray hair and bloodshot blue eyes. If she was happy to see me, she didn't show it. "I told you Karl wouldn't get here till five-thirty," she said.

"That's all right," I said. "I don't mind waiting."

"I have work to do."

"You wouldn't mind if I tagged along, would you?" I was delivering all this with my most cordial voice, along with a broad smile and a solicitous hand on the shoulder.

"I guess it's all right. You a cop?"

"Private investigator. I'm looking into the death of Harold Berg." I followed her into the kitchen, which hadn't felt the caress of a broom for many days.

"You know a cop named Rocco?"

"I am acquainted with the good lieutenant."

"He's a real pain in the ass, if you ask me."

"Yes, Lieutenant Rocco can be very irritating. If I can, I'll keep him away from you." I sat down on a kitchen chair. A plastic tablecloth with a floral design covered the table.

The Mrs. grunted, turned toward the stove, and began banging pots and pans. "I told Karl he shouldn't call about those people he saw, but he wouldn't listen to me. He never listens to me."

"Maybe he thought it was his responsibility as a good citizen." She stopped banging and looked at me as if I had the IQ of a turnip. "So many people refuse to get involved these days." She looked away again, and I saw my chance. "What night was it that he saw Berg down by the river?"

She glared at me. "July tenth!" she said. "It was July tenth. Not July eleventh."

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I could see this was a touchy point, so I smiled and made some inane comments about the weather and the corn crop. She began opening tin cans and pouring stuff into the pots and pans. I hoped she wouldn't invite me to stay for dinner.

At five-thirty Karl Huber came lumbering through the back door into the kitchen. His physical appearance could not have been more different from his wife's. He was tall and lean. His hair was curly and dark. His brown eyes were as clear as a button. He looked at me as if he was trying to remember who I was. His wife took control. "This guy wants to see you, Karl," she said, "about those people you saw July tenth." She looked at him hard and long. He stared vacantly at her, then turned and stared vacantly at me.

"Why don't we step outside and get out of your wife's way," I said. I was up and moving before I finished the sentence.

"That's all right. You can stay," she said, but too late. I already had Karl by the elbow and was leading him out the back door. He followed along like an obedient child.

"Let's have a look at your car," I said, spotting a shiny red Oldsmobile parked in the alley. I was still waiting for Karl to utter his first sound. "Looks real nice."

"Yeah." He stared at the car.

"Too bad about the front end."

"I got insurance." He looked over at me.

"That's good. How'd the accident happen?"

"It was dark. I hit some mud and slid into a post."

"Then what happened?"

"I got out to take a look."

Karl wasn't making this easy. Getting information out of him was like pulling tree stumps. "And what exactly did you see? Besides the damage to your car?"

"A man and woman arguing."

"What about?"

"I don't know. Money, I think."

"What did these people look like?"

"The woman had blond hair. She was good-looking. The man was fat and bald."

"Now that was the same night Harold Berg drowned, wasn't it? July eleventh." Slowly, carefully, casually, Scofield had brought the discussion around to the real issue.

Karl thought about this. "Tenth."

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"How's that?"

"July tenth. It happened July tenth."

"That's funny." I rubbed my chin over the confusion this caused me. "I could have sworn Lieutenant Rocco told me it was July eleventh."

"I thought it was July eleventh. Then I remembered it was July tenth."

"I see. Just a mistake. It's easy to make mistakes, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Who reminded you of the real date?" I watched for a reaction—a remnant of a bribe or a threat. I didn't see one. All I saw was the same impassive Karl.

"Ellen," he said.

"Ellen?" He nodded toward the house. "Oh, yes," I said, "Ellen."

I woke up the next morning in the same condition as the night before: without a clue. Why the hell had big dumb Karl changed his story? I got dressed and walked down to Vigo's Cafe in hopes that a free breakfast would reveal the truth. The river was still dropping and would soon fall below flood stage—fifteen feet. I'd have to eat fast. I finished my bacon and eggs in record time, and Vigo walked over to refill my coffee cup. He had to reach out to pour. His stomach kept him at arm's length from the world.

"How's business, Vigo?" I said.

"Good, real good. Expenses are so high, though; sometimes I don't think I'll make it."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. Rent, utilities, repairs, supplies, wages, taxes, insurance. If I don't pay my insurance by tomorrow, I won't have a thing if the place burns down."

I was nodding sympathetically when a hunch suddenly hit me. I thanked Vigo for the breakfast, slurped some coffee just to be polite, and headed for the door, trying not to hyperventilate. It was raining. I walked to Fourth and Brady, ran up the stairs, and grabbed the phone.

"Mrs. Huber, this is Michael Scofield. I think I can get Rocco to leave you alone if I can show him that you filed for an accident that occurred on the tenth, not the eleventh. Otherwise, he's going to keep pestering you."

She hesitated. "All right."

"What's your insurance company?"

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"Reliable."

"Do you have the policy number?"

"Just a minute." She put the phone down. I stood up, sat down, stood up again, sat down again, fidgeted. Finally, she came back on the line. "I don't see what good this will do."

"Believe me. I know what I'm doing." She gave me the number.

I called information, then dialed a number in Des Moines.

"Reliable Insurance Company."

"Claims department, please."

A woman came on the line. "Claims department. May I help you?"

"This is Karl Huber. I want to check on a claim."

"Certainly. Could I have your policy number, please."

I gave her the number. Scofield thinks of everything. I heard her pecking away at a computer keyboard.

"Mr. Huber," she said, "we show that you filed a claim for an accident that occurred on July tenth."

"Right."

"That claim is currently being processed. Someone will be calling you to make an appointment to inspect the damage."

"Good. I forgot to pay my bill on time and I was afraid I might not be covered."

"No, you were covered through the tenth. If the accident occurred a day later, you would not have been covered. We received your premium two days later, so you're fully covered now."

"Thank you. Thank you very much," I said, and I meant it.

I called Tracy Berg, and she told me to come right out. I parked in front of her Spanish Colonial house and looked around. No Spaniards in sight. There was a big blond-haired guy, though, coming out of the house, the same man I'd seen two days before. He climbed into his Mercedes-Benz and drove away. I walked to the door, thankful that the rain had stopped for a few minutes.

Tracy seemed happier to see me this time. She found just what I needed, a recent photograph of her father and Ingrid Larson. "I've been planning to burn this," she said. "It's a good thing you called when you did."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll bring it back so you can complete the ceremony." I started to go, then stopped. "By the way, this is the second time I've seen the big blond guy here. Is he your boyfriend?"

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She laughed, then put her hand over her mouth. "Pardon me for laughing."

"That's all right. Laughter is permitted between the hours of eight and five daily, except Sunday."

"It just seemed funny. He's not my boyfriend. He's Eric Larson, Ingrid's brother. He's a lot nicer than she is. He's staying with Ingrid now. Whenever I need something from the house, he brings it over. That way I don't have to see Ingrid, and she doesn't have to see me."

"I see what you mean. It is funny. Who is your boyfriend?"

"I don't have one."

"That's too bad. For the boys, I mean."

She smiled but said nothing. That was my cue to get out. I was starting to sound like the scorekeeper in a singles bar.

At five-twenty that afternoon, I drove down the alley and parked behind Karl Huber's garage, out of sight to anyone in the house. I could see why Karl didn't park in the garage. It was full of junk—used engine parts, flat tires, broken tools—the kind of stuff people like Karl think they'll make money on someday. At five-thirty he pulled up in his red Oldsmobile. "Karl," I said, "how you doing?"

"Okay." He had on the same gray work pants and plaid shirt as the day before.

"Nice day." The rain had started again. "You want to take me for a drive? I have some news about your insurance claim."

"Sure." Good old Karl. Innocent to the last. I got in, and Karl drove over to Rockingham Road and turned west. "What's this about the insurance?" he said.

"Karl," I said, "it's like this. First you told Lieutenant Rocco that you saw Berg the night of your accident, July eleventh. Then you changed your mind and said it happened on July tenth. This confused Rocco, Karl, and when I found out about it, it confused me, because the man you saw that night ended up floating face-down in the water behind John O'Donnell Stadium, and he wasn't waiting in line to buy tickets. They're not selling tickets there, Karl. They're not playing ball there. Someone left the sprinklers on and the outfield is full of carp."

Karl didn't respond. He just stared straight ahead. The windshield wipers slapped back and forth.

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"Something else bothered me, Karl. I wondered if changing your mind about the date of the accident might affect your insurance claim. Insurance companies are always looking for ways to avoid paying a claim. What if they heard about this? What if someone told them?" For the first time, he turned and looked at me. "Better keep your eyes on the road, Karl. You wouldn't want to have another accident. You're in enough trouble already."

He looked back at the road. "Who's going to tell them?"

"Don't know, Karl. Someone's bound to when all this comes out. When they find out you lied, they won't even let you keep your policy. No one will. You'll have to walk. Imagine that, having to walk three blocks to work every morning."

"I like to drive."

"I know you do, Karl. That's why you and I have to keep a lid on this."

"How?"

"Tell Rocco the truth. Tell him all this happened the eleventh, not the tenth."

"Then the insurance company won't pay."

"I know. Your premium was due on the tenth. Drop the claim."

"How do you know that?" He looked at me again, then back at the road.

"I'm in the business of knowing, Karl. I'm a detective. How much will it cost to fix the car?"

"Two thousand dollars."

"If I can get you the two thousand, will you tell Rocco the truth about the date?"

"I don't know."

"Better decide, because if you don't tell him I will. Then you'll be in even worse trouble. Rocco and Reliable will turn your car into bottle caps. But if you do what I say, I won't tell Rocco about Reliable, and I won't tell Reliable about Rocco."

"What about Ellen?"

"I won't tell her, either. Call Rocco tomorrow morning, and I'll give you the two thousand tomorrow afternoon. By the time she finds out, you'll already have the money. What do you say?"

"Okay."

"Good. Stop the car." He pulled over to the curb and left the motor running. I showed him the picture of Berg and Ingrid. "Is this the man and woman you saw arguing down by the river the night of the accident?"

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"It's the man, but not the woman."

"How about this woman?" I showed him the picture of Tracy.

"Yeah, that's her. She's the one who was arguing with the bald guy. She was yelling at him and he was yelling back."

"Did you see anyone else?" He thought about this. "Take your time. This is important."

"There was another man standing a little ways away, watching them. I didn't know if he was with them or not. I thought maybe he was just watching them, like me."

"Maybe he was. What did he look like?"

"He was tall and he had blond hair."

"Is this the man?" I showed him the picture of Randy Berg.

"No, that's not him. This guy was bigger and a little older." He looked at me. I didn't have any more pictures. "Do I still get the two thousand dollars?" he said.

Karl turned the car around and we drove back down Rockingham Road. "I need a little more of your time," I said.

"I'm already late," he said. "What about Ellen?"

"Call and tell her you have to work overtime."

"How long?"

"Until dark."

Karl stopped at a phone booth and made the call. I had no idea how he would explain having to work until dark. All the plants on Rockingham Road had plenty of light bulbs. "She didn't believe me," he said when he got back.

I told him where to go next, and in a few minutes we were sitting in Karl's red Oldsmobile half a block from Harold Berg's limestone house. Red isn't the right color for surveillance, but we didn't have time to repaint the car. We sat there for two hours.

Finally, the big blond guy came out the door and headed for the Mercedes, which was parked in front. "There he is," I said.

Karl raised my binoculars and looked at Eric Larson. "Yeah, that's him," he said. Eric got into the car and drove away.

"You're pretty good at this. What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm an inspector. I watch for bad cans and jars as they come off the line."

"Maybe you should become a professional witness. You could hang around the river, waiting for people to drown."

"Are we done?" I could tell he wasn't ready for a career change, so I told him we were done. He started the car and drove me back to the Chevy.

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* * *

I climbed into the Chevy and got out of range before Ellen saw me. Then I found a place to park and picked up the car phone.

"Ingrid, this is Michael Scofield. Would you pay a thousand dollars right now to find out the truth about Harold?"

"Of course."

"I'll be there in five minutes." I drove up to the house, where Ingrid came to the door with the check. I walked back to the car and called Randy Berg.

"Listen to what I say before getting mad," I said. He didn't hang up, which I interpreted as a hopeful sign. "By this time tomorrow, I'll know the truth about what happened to your father, but it's going to cost a thousand dollars. Would you be willing to pay that thousand? You won't get it back."

"What's it for?"

"To convince a witness to go to the police. This isn't a trick. I'm not trying to cheat you. You can check my background if you want."

"I already did."

"And?"

"You drink too much."

"Nobody's perfect. What about the thousand?"

"Come on out."

Randy lived in a new subdivision on the north side of town. I took his check and drove home. Lots of streets were still full of water, and I wasn't anywhere near Venice.

The next morning, I took the checks to the bank. Then I went to my office and dialed the clerk of court's number. Mary Sobel answered the phone. I like Mary. She has the quaint notion that a public employee should serve the public.

"Could you check the birth records for Ingrid Larson and her brother Eric," I said.

"Hang on," she said. I stared at the empty building across the street. I was beginning to have serious doubts about that building. Maybe it held no secrets at all. Maybe it held only bats and winos. Mary returned to the phone. "Ingrid Larson was born thirty-three years ago on March third at St. Luke's Hospital. Her parents were Richard Larson and Alice Hellstrom Larson. Both parents are now deceased."

"What about brother Eric?"

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"Sorry, Mike. There is no brother Eric. Ingrid Larson is an only child."

It began to sprinkle as I walked out of the building. By the time I reached McClellan Heights, a hard, steady rain was falling. Water ran down the tile roof of the house and flooded the gutters. Rain beat against the stucco walls and ran in a thousand tiny rivulets through the grass.

I parked in the driveway and ran to the house. I still hadn't found my umbrella. Tracy answered the door in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. She led me into the living room and sat down in an easy chair. I sat in a chair across from her, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees. "I've taken the investigation into your father's death as far as I can," I said. "Today I'm going to turn over everything I have to the police. I'll talk to Ingrid, too, but I wanted to see you first."

"Oh?"

"I have a good idea what happened and why, and neither was what I expected."

"I see."

"I didn't expect to find that you were with your father the night he died, but now I'm certain you were. I talked to a witness who sees and remembers things with perfect clarity, even though he probably couldn't read a fourth-grade textbook. The irony is that you're the one who told me about him. When he changed his story, you believed him. You didn't know how much he saw or when he saw it. But he's ready to testify that he saw you there, arguing with your father the night he drowned. I don't know exactly how he ended up in the water, but I can guess. You argued about his marriage to Ingrid. You pushed him. He fell in. Or maybe Eric did it for you. He was there, too. Your father couldn't swim, and he was as drunk as ever. But I'm not worried about the details. The fact that you were there and lied about it afterwards convinces me. You either pushed him in or let him fall in and did nothing to save him, just because his marriage might reduce your inheritance."

"This is all very interesting, Mr. Scofield, but there's a problem with your theory. Why would Eric help murder the man his sister planned to marry?" She spoke these words bravely, but I could see the fear rising in her eyes.

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"He wouldn't normally, but he might if he had fallen for you." I watched her reaction. She blushed. Not a great deal, but enough. "And that's probably why you thought he was helping you, but I have some bad news. Eric isn't Ingrid's brother. She has no brother. My guess is that he helped you because the scam was going too far. He was glad to have Ingrid take your father's money and share it with him, but he didn't want her to marry him. He doesn't love you. He's using you. He loves Ingrid."

The color drained from her pretty face. My accusation of murder didn't bother her half as much as learning of Eric's true relationship with Ingrid. Murder was nasty, but false love was tragic. "You're making this up just to trick me," she said, but I could see that she didn't believe it.

"I'm going to make a call," I said as I stood up. "You'd better find your umbrella. Lieutenant Rocco will want you to go downtown with him."

She didn't respond. I didn't even know if she was still listening. I called Rocco. Karl Huber had already reestablished himself as the state's leading witness. I told Rocco what I knew, and a squad car arrived two minutes later. I soon found myself getting in the way, so I walked out through the rain and climbed into the car. My clothes got soaked and I didn't even care.

After lunch I drove out to West Second Street and gave Ellen a check for two thousand dollars. When she saw it, she acted almost civil, but I still didn't think we'd ever be close friends. I went back to the office and began writing my report for Ingrid. It had to be good. I was going to charge her enough to pump out every basement from Dubuque to Hannibal.

At five o'clock I closed the office and walked down Brady Street to see how far the water had receded for the day. It occurred to me as I stood there that except for four years in college, I had never lived more than twelve blocks from the Mississippi River. Even at college, I was only an hour's drive away, and I made that drive often.

I know what made Harold Berg go down to the river that night. It was the same thing that causes old men to sit in LeClaire Park and stare at the river for hours, day or night, drunk or sober. Berg might have lived another twenty or thirty years if his liver held out, long enough for thousands of visits to that park. By then he would have become an old man himself, and he wouldn't care much who got his big limestone house. ●

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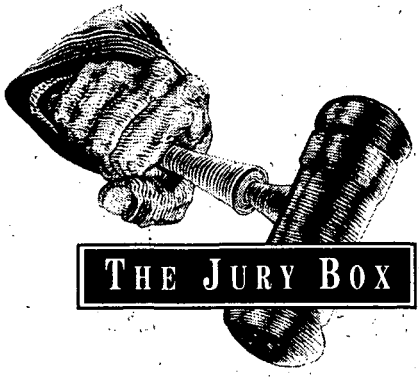

by Jon L. Breen

One measure of an author's stature in the field of crime and mystery fiction is the publication of a full-dress biography. By now the list of outstanding examples is relatively extensive: Julia Thorogood's *Margery Allingham: A Biography* (1991), Frank MacShane's *The Life of Raymond Chandler* (1976), Janet Morgan's *Agatha Christie: A Biography* (1984), Margaret Lewis's *Ngaio Marsh: A Life* (1991), John McAleer's *Rex Stout: A Biography* (1977), John Loughery's *Alias S.S. Van Dine* (1992), Francis M. Nevins, Jr.'s *Cornell Woolrich: First You Dream, Then You Die* (1988), and several writers' accounts of Wilkie Collins, Arthur Conan Doyle, Dashiell Hammett, Georges Simenon, and Dorothy L. Sayers. Still, several likely biographical subjects remain, among them the Ellery Queen team, Ross Macdonald, John D. MacDonald, P.D. James, John Le Carré, Julian Symons, and Ruth Rendell.

One of the most promising subjects for a complete biography, because of his importance to the mystery field, the eventfulness of his life, and the interest of his personality is the former occupant of "The Jury Box," John Dickson Carr (1906-1977). The greatest specialist in the locked room/impossible crime situation as well as a pioneer of the historical detective story, Carr brought to the form a rare combination of technical skill, productivity, enthusiasm, and pure style.

Douglas G. Greene, editor of several volumes of Carr's stories and radio plays, is surely the ranking expert on the author's works, and his *John Dickson Carr: The Man Who Explained Miracles* (Penzler, $35), written with access to the subject's pa-

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pers and the cooperation (but not the veto power) of his family, is everything that could have been hoped for, including a complete account of the life and acute critical commentary. No one interested in the history of the detective story form should be without it.

One of many memorable elements of the book is a reminder of how World War II was a defining element in so many lives. An American resident of Great Britain, Carr made the decision to stay in his adopted homeland despite the destruction of his London house by a German bomb and the subsequent loss of his surviving furniture in Bristol, an event treated at the time with brave humor. But on V-E Day in 1945, he wrote to Frederic Dannay in a somber mood: "I sat by the window last night, and tried to think about five and a half years, and all I could think of was the picture made by anti-aircraft guns in the sky on the night my house was destroyed. The odd part is that I feel the loss of house and possessions more than I did long ago when it happened" (page 299).

**** Jack Finney, *From Time to Time,* Simon and Schuster, $23. Simon Morley, who traveled through time to New York of the 1880s—and stayed there—in the classic science-fictional Mystery *Time After Time* (1970), now visits 1912 and tries to prevent World War I. The ill-fated voyage of the *Titanic* also figures in the plot. The sequel isn't quite up to the original—the contrivances that set the story in motion are somewhat strained, and the plot seems an excuse for the musings on time and social history—but Finney's unique touch disarms criticism. Like its predecessor, the novel makes an effective use of period photographs and drawings. The glimpse into the life of vaudeville performers, though only slightly related to the story, is especially memorable. The publicity-shy Finney, almost a J.D. Salinger or Thomas Pynchon on popular fiction, made his debut in the July 1947 *EQMM* with "The Widow's Walk." He has been long between books in recent years—his last was the 1983 non-fiction volume *Forgotten News.*

*** William Campbell Gault's *Man Alone* (Gryphon Publications, P.O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228; $15 trade paper, $30 limited hardcover). As Bill Pronzini's introduction tells us, this 1957 novel, for various reasons unrelated to its quality, did not find a publisher at the time of its writing, partly because of the stigma attached to category writers trying to break into the mainstream. The narrator/hero is pulp writer turned bestselling

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novelist John Calvin, whose literary success has led to lucrative but precarious (and, in the Hollywood novel tradition, soul-destroying) screenwriting jobs. The painful but humorous account of his experiences, written in Gault's distinctive first-person style when he was at the height of his powers, may not be as fine as his best private-eye novels, but it is strongly recommended to his fans and any reader interested in the period and background. While the novel, which combines the traditional Hollywood novel with the adultery novel popular in the fifties, is neither mystery nor science fiction, it is rich in allusions to both genres. As Pronzini points out, its greatest value is as an honest depiction of the writing life in a specific time and place. (One disquieting note that is true to the period: Calvin's pregnant wife continues to smoke like a chimney and, though vowing to limit her alcoholic consumption to beer, doesn't always keep to her pledge.)

*** John Lutz, *Burn*, Holt, $22.50. The latest about Florida private eye Fred Carver is typically tricky and skillful: Contractor Joel Brandt hires Carver to find out why Marla Cloy, a woman he says he doesn't know, is falsely accusing him of stalking her. Throughout the novel, the reader wonders along with the detective whether the client is villain or victim—or maybe a bit of each. In a sub-plot, Carver's girlfriend Beth Jackson ponders how to deal with an unexpected pregnancy.

*** Barry Willis: *The Strange Case of the Lost Elvis Diaries*, Waynoka Press, P.O. Box 40856, Memphis, TN 38174-0856; $8.95. Jefferson Parrish, wisecracking *Memphis Globe* reporter, is drawn into a potentially career-making story: the discovery of the diaries of Elvis Presley. Willis satirizes the Elvis cult and televangelism along with various conventions of the contemporary whodunit while delivering a genuine and comprehensible, if nutty, mystery plot. The novella length is appropriate to parody, and the cartoons of Greg Cravens add to the fun. Humor is an individual thing, but if you like Woody Allen's parodic writings, you may share my enthusiasm.

Whitechapel murders buffs and/or fans of graphic novels, i.e., comic books aimed at an adult audience, should look for Rick Geary's *Jack the Ripper* (NBM, 185 Madison Ave., Suite 1504, New York, NY 10016; $14.95), which is expertly designed and drawn and manages to pack a remarkable amount of fact and conjecture on the 1888 serial killer's crimes into its 64 pages.

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

PARLOR TRICKS YOU CAN PLAY ON YOURSELF

by Heidi Cyr

"So in the third page—I mean, the third *section*—they talk about Probing and Listening. Because one thing they said is that in Customer Service, our job is to mind other people's business." Pepper smiled, and we laughed obligingly at her borrowed joke. "So one of the things we have to know," she continued, "is how to *ask the right questions*—" Here she pounded the table dramatically with the heel of her hand. "—So we can give the customer the answer he needs. And we have to learn how to really *listen*, so we can determine not only the personality structure of the person—like you have that chart right there to tell you how to do—but also so that when they give you the information you need, you'll understand and know exactly what it is that—"

And so it went. On. And on. And on—with Pepper remaining astoundingly oblivious to the near-catatonic boredom of the rest of the group. It was late, almost two hours after the end of

Adventurous may be the word to describe first-time author Heidi Cyr. She's not only earned her wings as a writer, she's trying to complete requirements for a pilot's license while working full-time as a service agent for an airport charter service. Ms. Cyr has been writing since the age of twelve, but until now her credits have all been for nonfiction. †

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a long work day, and those of us who hadn't been lulled into unconsciousness by the endless, meandering, pointless, fragmentary sentences, were much more interested in dinner, TV, husband, and feet propped up in front of the fireplace than in hack lessons in pseudo-psychoanalysis.

My case, however, was slightly different. Since I had no husband and fireplace waiting for me in my dark little apartment, I was more or less actually listening to the hack psychology. More specifically, I was trying to figure out how well *I* fit into the personality profile categories laid out in Pepper's chart, and, alternatively, how accurately *anyone* would fit the specifications laid out in those four very boldly colored squares.

I'm a little bit of everything, I concluded, finally. Yearns for stability, that's me. Compliant, aggressive, needs approval, yep, yep, yep: All me. Surely nobody actually believes that there are only four kinds of people in the world?

". . . and so I found out that I was a type-four personality, and it's really helped me to deal with how I relate to other people, because I found out, you know, that I talk just to gain attention, and knowing that has really helped me to deal more effectively with other people! So anyway, any questions?" Those of us who were still awake enough to respond shook our heads.

"Okay. Well, anyway, after we talked about all this at the seminar, they had us do this thing—watch, this is really neat. This is one thing they had us do." Her eyes shone with excitement; it was clear that everything else that had gone before in the meeting had, for her, merely been a prelude to this moment. She took her notepad and very dramatically drew on the piece of paper a circle with cross hairs. Even those who were not quite awake found their eyes drawn to the paper.

"Is that a target?" Sherry said, expecting laughter, but Pepper was too serious, too intent on her performance, and bulldozed right over it.

"No. Watch this. This is to show you what you can do with your mind. Just your mind. They gave us this washer with a string, and you go like this. Watch." She held the washer over the center of the cross hairs, resting her elbow on the table. "Now you don't move your hand. You hold perfectly still and just use your mind." The washer started slowly to oscillate. "You don't move your hand at all."

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She smiled and looked at each of us in turn, eyebrows arched dramatically, and delivered her punch line:

"It's mind control."

No one was much moved, most of us being fairly well inured to Pepper's parlor tricks. Pepper herself seemed the most astonished by the whole thing—as she always was, being the kind of person who was able to convince herself that even the most improbable frauds, including those perpetrated by her, were absolutely real.

For my part, I was watching her hand carefully and could see the tiny movement in it, the almost imperceptible quivering in the muscles of the forearms that forced the washer into its erratic circle. Still, even as my eyes saw and my brain comprehended, I felt the cold, irrational chill of fear work its way slowly up my spine, and the hairs on the back of my neck prickled and stood on end.

Officially, the company Christmas party started at seven, but because no one wanted to be the first to arrive, everyone came very late, and thus it ended up that dinner could not be served until eight. The delay meant that there was more time for cocktails—which meant that by the time dessert and coffee were being served, the party was already *well* under way. My table, where the favored topic of conversation was Pepper, was no exception.

". . . Like at that meeting, where she pulled out that washer and string—"

"Like it was some convention for psychics she went to, instead of a manager's seminar."

"She's unbelievable."

"She's incredible."

"She's *nuts.*"

Sherry, always the first and the loudest when it came to Pepper-grinding, was in particularly high spirits. "It's because she doesn't have a real life, you know. She doesn't have anything outside of work: no man, her kids are grown up, all she does is sit at home and watch TV and get bloated on chocolate. And read romance novels. It's made her totally—you know." She spiraled a finger around her ear.

"Oh, totally," Kathy agreed.

"Yeah. Totally," echoed Maria.

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I was nodding too, but really only to remain anonymous. I usually tried to stay out of office gossip—in fact, I had made it a point of honor to avoid it—but then suddenly I remembered something that made me unable to resist the urge to speak up, just this once. I waited anxiously for an opening, then dropped my bombshell.

"She brought in a book for me today," I said, trying not to giggle and give away my excitement. "A book on white magic."

"What? Say that again?" Suddenly all eyes were on me, and I felt a flush rising in my cheeks. I said it again, not quite so anxiously this time.

"She brought in a book on white magic for me today."

"*What?* What for?" Sherry was frowning, waiting for a punch line I thought I'd already given. I shrugged.

"I don't know. Maybe she thinks I believe in that stuff." I smiled, trying to make it clear that I didn't.

Sherry sneered. "It's because you're nice to her," she said.

"A book on white magic? What was it about?" Maria asked, puzzled.

"Duh, Maria, what do you think?" Sherry stuck her tongue out and rolled her eyes—her "village idiot" look—and we laughed.

"No, I mean, what did it *say?*" Maria said, making the same face back at Sherry.

I shrugged again, sinking lower into my chair. "I don't know. I haven't even looked at it."

Sherry shook her head and rolled her eyes. "She's so *weird*—"

A sick, shameful feeling was beginning to burn its way into my stomach. "I think she's just lonely," I said, trying to dull it. "Lonely people sometimes do weird things to try to make their lives more interesting. To get attention, or whatever. Always trying to make believe that the world is not really the way it is. I think it gives them hope. . . ."

I stopped. They were staring at me, silent, their faces blank, a sudden sharpness in their eyes that I recognized only too well. Somehow, I realized, I had overstepped some invisible social boundary, had defended the undefendable, and had been cut off.

"Yeah," Sherry said, turning from me and deftly restoring the conversation to its former tenor. "Remember that time when Maria's boyfriend came in and she was all over him, trying to read his palm. . . ." She smirked, remembering, and we all laughed obligingly.

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For my part, I decided to drop out of the conversation for a while, finding it too much of a strain trying to stay inside this social circle. There were too many rules, too many nuances that were always changing, it seemed, and never logical—I couldn't ever seem to keep track of them all and somehow I always managed to end up at the hot end of the social poker. Which was why, I reminded myself, I made it a rule to stay out of the gossip in the first place.

But then, I thought to myself, things could be worse: I could be Pepper.

As the stream of conversation moved on without me, I let my eyes wander casually over the room, trying to pick out Matt's head from the sea of tables. I couldn't see him without straining—and that would have attracted attention—so eventually I gave up. I looked over at the dance floor instead, and saw that the band was just beginning to set up: That meant the dancing would begin soon.

Sweat broke out all over my body.

Stop it! I chided myself. This is ridiculous: You are being completely and utterly ridiculous!

For three months I had been torturing myself this way, fantasizing about this Christmas party, about wearing a new, elegant dress that would get compliments from everyone, about asking Matt Beech to dance, of having one slow, heart-stoppingly romantic dance with him at the end of which he would kiss me passionately right in front of everyone and then renounce his marriage to that other woman and carry me off to never-never land in his white coach.

I laughed out loud.

Heads turned first to look at me, then in the direction I was looking.

"What's so funny?" said Sherry.

"What happened?"

I blushed. "Nothing. I just thought of a joke," I mumbled.

"Well, tell us!"

I shook my head, starting to panic. "No, it's not that funny."

"Come on, tell us anyway."

"No, trust me, it's not that funny."

Sherry grinned sardonically. "Oh, sure. *Be* that way. You probably didn't even think of a joke—you're probably just *losing* it.

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Pretty soon we're gonna be calling the men in the white coats to come and get you."

They laughed, and I felt the red start to burn its way up my neckline.

They laughed louder.

"Oh, my God, look at her blushing!"

"Jesus, you're so *red!*"

"I've never seen anybody blush like that!"

A cold drop of sweat trickled from my armpit. I laughed nervously, trying to cover my humiliation, and made a desperate attempt to change the subject.

"So is it true you guys don't have to go to Pittcon?" I said.

Sherry nodded, the novelty of my blush suddenly forgotten. "Yeah. Phil finally said I didn't have to go, so I could go to Maria's wedding."

"Oh, that was generous of him," Kathy sneered.

"Yeah," said Maria, "I was so bummed out because I thought no one was going to be able to come. I mean—" Here she mouthed, "Pepper," and pointed not-so-discreetly to where Pepper was sitting at another table. "—I don't care about, but *you* guys . . . I was so happy when Phil said Sherry didn't have to go."

Kathy leaned over the table, eyebrows raised conspiratorially, and we instinctively leaned closer to meet her.

"Speaking of Pepper," she said, "somebody do me a favor and go tell her to *take that frigging bow out of her hair!* I mean, she's forty-seven years old, for Christ's sake!"

The others broke up laughing, and Sherry made loud meowing noises. I smiled, but it felt a little like stabbing myself in the back; after all those years of trying to keep myself above the catfighting, all it had taken was being asked to sit at their table—one *hint* of acceptance—to make me throw away every shred of morality I had. I couldn't decide which would be worse: Pepper knowing what was said about her behind her back, or her not having a clue and thinking that these people were her friends.

No, she couldn't think that, I thought, looking around at them as they grinned and sniggered behind their drinks. Besides, she's a notorious backstabber herself, and probably assumes the worst about everyone else—so why worry about her?

"Hey, look! They're opening up the bar again!"

"Cool!"

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"Well, what are we waiting for?" They stood up.

"You coming, Angie?"

I shook my head. "No, thanks. I have to drive tonight."

Sherry struck an offended pose, hip thrust out, nose high in the air. "Oh, okay, be that way. We'll be back."

They left, leaving me sitting alone at the table. I wouldn't have minded a drink, but I only had two dollars in my purse—not enough for a drink at a country-club bar.

I looked out at the dance floor; the band had started playing, but no one was dancing. No one looked even remotely interested. I felt an irrational stab of anger and silently cursed the stuffed shirts in this company who were only interested in eating and drinking and then getting the hell out. As if they had something better to do.

My God, I thought, with something like panic, what if *nobody* dances? What if HE leaves before anyone starts dancing? The rational part of my mind broke in briefly with a faint, "You idiot, what do you *really* expect to happen tonight?" which was immediately drowned in the sea of irrational, desperate expectation.

"What's the matter, sweetie, they walk off and leave you here?" I felt Pepper's hands on my shoulders and smelled the sour cigarette smell of her breath as she leaned down to shout in my ear.

"I think they went to get a drink," I said. She straightened up, and her hands began to knead my shoulders.

"Now, I know why *I* don't drink," she said, "but what's *your* excuse? You don't have the kid to worry about tonight!"

"Yeah, but I still have to drive."

"Oh, we could find someone to drive you home! Go ahead, take the night off! Relax! I have kids, I know what it's like! You need it every once in a while—am I right?"

I smiled and didn't answer. It was my standard way of avoiding saying no to her.

"Why don't you drink?" I asked instead. She gripped my shoulders and shook them roughly, like a cat worrying a mouse.

"Well, I'm allergic, sweetie—don't you remember, I told you that before!"

"Oh, that's right—"

"It does something to my blood.... It affects my blood so that—" her voice had fallen into its familiar pedantic tone, a

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signal to me that what was to follow would be a long string of twisted facts, half-truths, and out-and-out lies, most likely made up on the spot. It was a tone which I, in the short time I had worked under her, had come to loathe.

"You would go into anaphylactic shock," I said, hoping—hopelessly—to plug the dike with a big word she wouldn't recognize. It was a wasted effort; the river flowed on relentlessly.

"Yeah, but see, that affects your blood—it makes your blood react in a certain way—so that if I had even one drink, it would probably kill me."

She leaned over and frowned at me dramatically, in case I hadn't gotten the point.

"Really?" I tried to look shocked, just to satisfy her. She nodded.

"Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. One drink and *pffft!* Oh, yeah. Serious."

"Wow, that's too bad."

"Well, I haven't had a drink for fifteen years—that's too bad! But that's what I mean—you should live it up while you have the chance."

"Well, I just don't feel like drinking tonight."

She reared back, feigning shock. "Well, *jeeeeez,* okay! I guess you told me, didn't you! I guess I got that message loud and clear!" I smiled, trying to play along with the joke, even though it irritated me tremendously.

"Hey, Pepper, we were just talking about you." Sherry and the others had returned from the bar and were taking their places at the table.

Pepper raised an eyebrow and twisted her mouth into a smile. "Oh, yeah? Do I want to know? I don't think I like this! I mean . . ."

Sherry plowed on, ignoring her. "No . . . remember that thing you were doing the other day? When we had that meeting?"

"Well, you'll have to do better than *that,"* she said sarcastically. "It was a long meeting!"

"I mean, that thing with the string and you held it over the piece of paper?"

"Oh, yeah, that was something they showed us at the seminar to show how powerful your mind is." Pepper was instantly serious, having become the pedant once again.

"Right—"

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"Oh, well, thank you very much. I'm glad you told me. Now we've got that all cleared up!" She looked around at us, expecting laughter. We smiled obligingly.

"No, I mean, Kathy wants to try it."

Pepper became radiant, swelling visibly with excitement.

"Oh, yeah. It's really neat. Here, come on, sit down. We need something . . . that napkin." Someone handed her a clean napkin, and she spread it out in front of her. Then she pulled a pen out of her purse and with the same dramatic flourish as before, drew the circle with cross hairs on it. She then rummaged in her purse and pulled out a string with a washer tied on the end of it. No one was really surprised that she carried such a thing around with her: It seemed only to be a confirmation of Pepper's . . . Pepperness.

"Okay, now here's how you do it." Her face was intent as she propped her elbows on the table and held the string by her fingertips over the center of the cross hairs.

I almost laughed out loud at the seriousness with which the whole operation was carried out, wondering what would happen if Pepper ever came into contact with actual supernatural phenomena. She'd probably die of a heart attack, I thought. She reminded me a little of myself when I was in junior high, when I used to go to my friends' houses for slumber parties and we would scare each other by pretending to be psychic and/or telekinetic and/or possessed by the devil. We would "hypnotize" each other and make each other do strange things, all the time pretending to the point of believing that we were not making believe. I smiled, remembering the silliness of it all. It seemed we would do anything in those days to make ourselves forget that we were ordinary, nerdy kids—anything to make ourselves feel special, to feel . . . *powerful.*

"There, that's all there is to it! It's easy!" The washer was swinging slowly back and forth over the circle.

"It's creepy," Kathy said, frowning.

"It's not creepy, it's just your own mind. Here, try it."

"No, thanks. I've changed my mind."

"I want to try it!" Sherry said. Pepper smiled and handed her the string.

"Okay, just take this. Now prop your elbow up here, just like that. Now, just hold perfectly still and concentrate. Got it?"

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"Yeah. Like this?" Sherry asked, and only Pepper missed the note of mockery in her voice.

I spoke up. "Pepper, I'm going to get some punch, you want some?"

"Sure, sweetie. Thank you very much."

"No problem. Anyone else?" They all shook their heads, their attention fixed on Sherry and the washer dangling motionlessly on its string.

I got up and made my way slowly over to the punch bowl, feeling self-conscious in my new high heels and formal dress. I rarely wore high heels, and these were particularly treacherous, having spike heels and slick bottoms. I looked over at the dance floor, which was still empty. Who are you kidding? I scoffed. You can barely *walk* in these shoes—you'd never be able to *dance* in them. Just then, I caught sight of Matt's dark head rearing above the rest of the crowd at his table, and my heart started thudding in my chest.

Stop it! I scolded. Stop doing this to yourself! People like you get put away, you know—people who get obsessed. Keep it up and you'll end up in a padded cell playing patty-cake with invisible leprechauns.

I chuckled. It was all so silly, this infatuation with Matt—a married man, no less! I wasn't one of those lunatics who went around collecting the nose hairs of people I liked and following them around everywhere. Of course, I didn't have to follow him everywhere—we worked at the same place. Lucky me. I laughed again. Maybe that's the real difference between me and the lunatics, I thought. I'm luckier.

"What's so funny?" I looked up and saw a colleague smiling at me over the punch bowl, eager to be let in on the joke.

"Oh, nothing," I said, smiling back, "I'm just being weird."

She laughed. "Oh, well, okay. You're allowed, I guess."

"Oh, yes. Everyone should be weird at least one night a year: It keeps you sane."

She laughed again. "Yeah, right. Hey, where's the baby tonight?"

"One of my friends is watching her for me."

"Oh, that's good. You need a night off every once in a while."

I nodded. "This is the first night I've had in a *long* while."

She smiled at me sympathetically. "That's too bad. Well, enjoy it while you've got it!"

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"Thanks, I will," I said, and as I watched her walk away, I caught another glimpse of Matt just as he was leaning over to kiss his pretty wife on her smiling lips. I decided, then, to go take a look at the Christmas tree.

It was right next to Matt's table, a huge affair almost fifteen feet tall and covered with the latest in old-style paper and wood ornaments. I strolled casually past him, trying to get a better look at those amazingly ugly and yet very expensive ornaments. I lingered there by the tree as long as I could, examining several of the ornaments very carefully, presenting my dress and my best angles and features, until I sensed that my time was up. Then I strolled again, very coolly, in front of his table, back to the punch bowl, past the empty dance floor, and back into the crowd. He never even looked up.

When I got back to the table, they were busy discussing Sherry's apparent lack of mind control. She was still sitting with her elbow propped on the table, staring intently at the washer with a slight smile on her face. The washer hung straight down, unmoving.

"Well, Sher, I guess you just don't have the mind power—you're always calling *Maria* the dumb one!"

"Hey!" Maria protested.

"I had a cousin who was psychic," Kathy said. "She was my dad's cousin from Italy."

"Really? What did she do?"

"I don't know. Whatever psychics do. She knew when things were going to happen, stuff like that. My dad said one time she knew when his brother was going to break his arm . . . or die in a car crash, something like that."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Matt get up from his table and head toward the punch bowl. God, I agonized, my chest aching, only two minutes later—or earlier . . .

"That happens to me sometimes," I said suddenly, surprising myself.

"Really?" They all looked at me. I shrugged, terrified at what I'd done.

"Yeah," I giggled and tried desperately to downplay the lie. "Nothing big, like predicting a plane crash or how much weight Liz Taylor's going to lose or anything like that—"

They laughed. "But . . . I knew when my grandmother was going to die."

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Sherry sniggered, still frowning intently at the motionless washer. "You mean when she was lying in the hospital with tubes up her nose?" she said, and everyone laughed.

I laughed along with them, but suddenly it seemed important to me to defend what only seconds ago had been a flat-out lie.

"No, nothing like that," I said casually. "She just came over to see us one day, and when she left, I started to cry because I knew it was the last time I would see her. And then four days later, she died. In her sleep."

"Wow," said Kathy, impressed. "How old were you?"

"Thirteen."

"Wow. That's really weird."

I nodded, reveling in their amazement. "Yeah and sometimes I can—"

"Hey! Look!" All eyes turned to Sherry.

"Good job, Sher," Pepper said, "you finally did it." The washer was finally moving in a tiny, erratic circle.

"Looks like its gonna be a girl," someone said, and we all laughed.

"Okay, Angie, it's your turn," Pepper said.

"Okay," I said, determined not to let my moment be stolen that easily. Pepper took the washer from Sherry and handed it to me.

"You ever move things with that psychic brain of yours?" she said.

"No," I laughed, "I wish I could."

"Well, here's your chance," she said.

Yeah, right, I thought. Here's my chance. I propped my elbow on the table and let the washer fall. I made faces, letting them know that I wasn't taking it too seriously.

Wouldn't they be surprised if tables and chairs started flying around, I thought, and chuckled to myself. I steadied the washer with my free hand and fixed my eyes intently on it. Before long, it started to swing slowly in a circle.

"Hey, I think you're a real psychic!" said Pepper, only half-jokingly.

"No," I said, laughing.

"No, really!"

"Ooo . . . Angela's psyyyyychic, Angela's psyyyyychic!" Sherry chanted, waving her arms like a witch casting her spell.

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"Oh, come on," I said. I stood up from the table and handed the washer back to Pepper.

"I'm going to get some more punch—Pepper?"

"Sure, baby, thanks."

I walked quickly over to the punch table, scouting the dance floor. Matt was long gone from the punch table, but there was always the chance . . . I glanced back at my table, torn between wanting to get back to the group and not wanting to miss an opportunity to ask Matt to dance, if one should present itself. He was nowhere near the dance floor, of course; he was talking in a large cluster of people that included his wife, near the Christmas tree.

If only I had some excuse to go over and talk to him. If only I could get his attention.

Discouraged, I picked up the punch glasses and went back to my own table. By the time I got there, the discussion had moved on to the subject of supernatural party games.

"Hey, did you guys ever play with a Ouija board?" Sherry was saying.

"Oh, yeah," said Pepper, nodding excitedly. "All the time. Absolutely."

Kathy shivered. "No, those things give me the creeps."

"Oh, come on," said Sherry, poking Kathy's arm playfully. Kathy grimaced and rubbed her arm, petulant.

"I'm not kidding," she said.

"What about that game we used to play at parties, the one where somebody lays on the floor and everybody makes a circle around them and they lay their fingers on them and you try to make them levitate?"

"That's a *party game?*" Kathy said, horrified.

"Yeah, sure, we used to play it all the time."

"Did it ever work?"

"Oh, yeah," said Pepper, frowning seriously. Kathy eyed her doubtfully.

"Did *you* ever get levitated?" she asked, her voice edged with sarcasm.

"Heck yeah."

Maria wrinkled her nose. "What did it feel like?"

Pepper paused, searching. "Well, it kind of felt like electric shocks running all up and down your body—"

"Eeewww!"

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"No! It felt good, it really did!"

"Really?" Maria looked doubtful.

"We should try it!" Sherry said suddenly.

"What?!" Kathy screeched.

"Yeah, why not? We should try to levitate somebody, just for the hell of it."

"Right here?"

"Yeah, we should levitate Phil right up to the ceiling fan, knock his wig off." Everybody laughed.

"Come on, let's just try it," Sherry pleaded.

"Where? Here?"

"No—we can go into one of the small conference rooms—"

"You're *nuts!*"

"Come on, let's just try it!"

"Well, if you guys are gonna do that, I'm getting out of here." Kathy got up and stood by her chair for a moment as if expecting us to stop her and say we were only kidding—but none of us did. After a few seconds, when she didn't get the reassurance she wanted, she rolled her eyes in disgust and left to join a group of her own people from the purchasing department. We watched her go, then looked at each other and laughed nervously.

"Well, are we gonna do it?"

"Yeah, sure, why not?" We all looked at Maria, waiting. She sighed.

"Oh, okay—but if it starts to get freaky, I'm outta there."

We found a small conference room just off the main hallway, far enough from the ballroom that the noise of the Christmas party was only a slight hum in the background. We snuck inside and closed the door before snapping on the lights. Then we made a circle around the small conference table, all giggling like schoolgirls sneaking into the bathroom for a cigarette.

"Okay, who's gonna go first?" Sherry said.

"I'll do it," Pepper said. "I need to lay down anyway—I think I ate too much."

She climbed up on the table and we turned off the lights and made a circle around her, laying our fingertips gently on her arms, her legs, her head.

"Okay, now," Sherry began, "everybody close your eyes and concentrate. Just visualize Pepper being lifted off the table, floating—"

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"Yeah—just imagine the process, the air molecules just lifting me up—"

"Pepper, you're not supposed to talk."

"Ooooo—*sor-ry!*"

"Okay, just concentrate. Concentrate . . . Feel her going up . . . up . . . She's getting lighter, she's leaving the table . . ."

"How long do we have to keep this up?" Maria whined.

"Well, it's never gonna work if you keep breaking your concentration."

"Okay, okay."

"Now, just concentrate. . ."

I closed my eyes and tried to picture Pepper floating above the table. I concentrated hard, hard enough that white spots began to appear at the edge of my vision and my head felt light as a helium balloon. The scope of my vision contracted and soon I was seeing Pepper from the end of a long tunnel; she was rising up and up—she kept rising until every pair of hands fell away but mine, and still she kept going up and up. . . . And then I saw myself rising up with her, and the faces around us were lifted in astonishment, white with fear, and still we went up and up, and soon my head was expanding to fill the room, and my arms and legs and fingertips tingled with electricity—

Under our fingers, Pepper began to tremble.

"I think something's happening—"

"Oh, my God—"

"Do you feel that?"

"I think we're really doing it!"

"Pepper, what's happening?" Sherry's voice was tense with excitement—even in the dim light I could see the huge shiny roundness of her eyes. Under our hands, Pepper was jerking violently as if being electrocuted, and it was hard to keep our fingers in contact with her.

Maria opened her eyes and frowned. "It doesn't feel like she's going up—" Then she squealed and jumped back. Sherry reached over quickly and flicked on the light, and suddenly everyone was screaming, running for the door.

Everyone, that is, except me.

It was her eyes that held me: those terrified, accusing eyes, shrunk to the size of pinpricks by the swollen flesh around them. The whole face had in fact become a horrible bloated parody of the original; the flesh was red and blotched and the bulbous lips

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gaped and worked like a fish caught on dry land. The hand I was touching reached out and clutched my wrist, the tiny eyes pleaded, desperate. Her breath was escaping only in short squeaks, and it occurred to me suddenly that she was choking to death.

A little thrill went up my spine.

Then, all at once, the convulsions stopped. Slowly, the hand around my arm loosed its grip and fell away, leaving a glaring white mark. I stared at the white mark blankly for some few seconds, then, hardly knowing why, I leaned forward to whisper into that swollen, deaf ear.

"It's really not a good idea to mess with things you don't understand," I said gently. "I know you didn't expect this to happen—I mean, who would? To tell you the truth, though—" I hesitated, touching her hand sympathetically. "—I was really afraid that something like this might happen. . ."

Then the door burst open and in rushed Sherry with—who else—Matt and the manager in tow. At first they shrank from the sight of the dead, swollen body, but then Matt stepped forward quickly and took Pepper's hideous face in his hands. He tilted her head back and gently pried her mouth open. Then, closing his eyes, he laid his mouth over hers and breathed his sweet, precious breath into those lifeless lungs.

How jealous I was of that grotesque, bloated corpse.

It seemed an eternity before the paramedics finally appeared, pushing their way through the crowd that had formed outside the conference-room door, and prying the two of them apart.

Frowning, one of the paramedics leaned down and smelled around Pepper's mouth.

"How much has she been drinking?" he asked.

"She hasn't been drinking at all!" Sherry answered, her eyes wide and frightened.

The paramedic glared at her angrily. "Yes, she has. I can smell it."

"But she said she was allergic—"

"Oh my God." Maria put her hand to her mouth. Sherry shook her head wildly.

"I never saw her drink anything but punch!"

"Oh God," wailed Maria, "what did we do?"

"Shut up!" Sherry snapped, and then struggled to recover herself. "What about the punch? Was the punch spiked? Did anyone

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drink the punch? Angie?" She looked at me, and I shook my head, my eyes still fixed on Pepper's face.

"I know what happened," I said. Every pair of eyes in the room turned to stare at me. I could sense the look of horror on Maria's face—she thought I was going to tell them about the levitation. Blame it on the parlor trick. I smiled.

"I did it."

"What?" Sherry's whisper was as loud as a shout in the sudden deathly silence.

"I had my hands too close to her heart," I said. "I . . . I just had this picture of her in my mind. Sometimes I . . . I don't know my own strength. . . ." Even saying it sent an electric tingle up and down my skin. "Sometimes I just stop their hearts—I had this picture of her in my head, all red and swollen and horrible." The sound of the words began to fill me with a white light so potent that it seemed to shoot right out of the top of my head in a column of flame that I thought everyone must be able to see. I thought of Matt and smiled, knowing that I must be glowing like a million-candlepower bulb.

My moment, I thought, *has arrived.*

My eyes finally released their hold on Pepper's dull, dead body and turned in the direction of that tall, vibrant one, with those quaintly uneven white teeth, those long, delicate hands—those thinning waves of black hair. I looked him right in his heart-stoppingly soft brown eyes and asked:

"Do you want to dance?"

I don't remember his answer. Or anything else that happened for quite a while after that.

It must have been a good one, though, because when I play the scene back on the bare yellow walls of my room like a movie in a theater, it has a happy ending. Sometimes, it seems, dreams do come true—if you have the will power to achieve them. I *have* that power.

I have to be careful these days, though, who I touch, because although I've made a great deal of progress—I'm not as much the primitive as I used to be—I don't always have complete control over that white-hot column of light. I'm afraid that one day I'll slip, and someone will get hurt again.

That would be bad. ●

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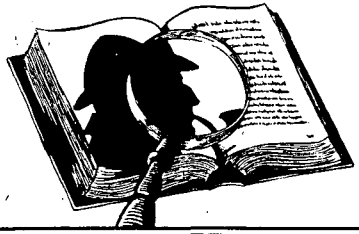

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

Killing With Calories

by Henry Slesar

"Do we have suspects?" Captain Bushmill said to the chief. "How about all the fat people in the world?"

Halfway across the room, Stanton knew he was talking about the three bizarre murders that were spoiling the appetite of everyone in Homicide.

The first victim was the most famous. Sammy Richards had been America's most visible diet guru for twenty years, and he was as sprightly as ever on the day he died, the day he found a gift on the doorstep of his bachelor apartment. It was a Bavarian cream pie, a dietary sin even he couldn't resist.

"Someone knew his weakness," the chief grunted. "That ought to narrow the suspect list. Same goes for Bixie Birdwell."

Bixie was America's newest diet-and-exercise personality. She had enthralled TV viewers with her mocking rhymes, her crew-cut red hair, her arrogant smile. But there was no smile on her face when she was found sprawled on her white rug; only a smudge of fudge. She would probably have finished the box if the first piece hadn't contained strychnine.

Professor Malcolm Edwards was the oddest of the victims. He had been the butt of every campus joke, a caricature of the absent-minded professor, arriving at classes in carpet slippers, wearing earmuffs in summer, never remembering a student's name. But the last laugh was his. His article on hypnotism as a dieting method caught the attention of tabloid TV. The professor soon became

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a TV personality, peddling his theories with surprising success. He made money, met a woman. He plunged into the competitive field with a vow to become number one.

Unfortunately, death intervened. Stanton found him in his study, his face contorted with pain, the result of a dose of poison. The source was obvious—a box of chocolates, one missing from its paper cup.

It was very much like the other two murder scenes, with one exception. Next to the chocolates was a sheet of paper with one ominous sentence: "YOU ARE GOING TO DIE."

To Stanton, it looked as if the killer was no longer satisfied with surreptitious homicide. His ego demanded more.

But now the pattern was obvious, and the diet gurus still living had to be warned.

Mac LeJune was the oldest fitness promoter alive. Well past seventy, he continued to deliver his vigorous exercise philosophy to viewers impressed by his longevity. Stanton discovered that he was a bitter man who reviled the new fitness pundits who failed to credit him as father of the movement.

Suzi Switzer, with her girlish curls and baby voice, cajoled viewers into following her diets and buying her videos. She was the richest of them all, thanks to an enterprising husband who managed her affairs and also managed to keep it a secret that Suzi suffered from bulimia.

As a physician, Dr. Marvin Cruikshank could claim the high ground when it came to dietary advice (although some people questioned his degree, which was never visible in his office). His latest book was the best-selling work of its kind, although there was a rumor that a rival was preparing a similar book which had an advance order larger than his own.

When the chief had grumbled his way out of the captain's office, Stanton dropped his bulk into a chair two sizes too small for him. Stanton weighed 240 pounds.

"The chief may be right," he said. "Maybe we *can* narrow down the suspects. The killer might not be just a dissatisfied dieter. The motive might be to eliminate the competition."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because they all know each other. They hate each other, but they still socialize. Conferences, parties. The killer knew where to put the strychnine from knowing their weaknesses."

"So you think it's one of the people you've seen?"

"Yes, it's one of them."

When he told him who, the captain gasped. "How did you know? How did you figure it out?"

"Not with calories." Stanton grinned. "With character."

He took some jelly beans from the dish on the captain's desk.

Who was the killer and how did Stanton know? *Turn to page 113 for "The Final Paragraph."*

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BAD DESIGN

by Scott Mackay

Detective Barry Gilbert stood on the playing field of Wentworth College for Boys, hands in his pockets, and looked at the crab apple tree in the corner. Even now, thirty years later, he hated the place.

He lifted the yellow police tape and walked closer to the crab apple tree; the leaves were gone this late in November, but many apples still clung, withered and tough, to the tangle of branches, crimson against the darkening sky. Here was the scene of his degradation. Here was the place that changed his life. Only a coincidence that a seventeen-year-old boy should be murdered here three decades later. He looked at the large spill of blood, most of it now seeped into the ground—the grass never grew here, there was only mud. The coroner's report: contusions, lacerations, fractures, trauma, cerebral hemorrhage; the usual euphemisms Dr. Blackstein used whenever the victim had been beaten to death with a blunt object. But what kind of blunt object? Why couldn't Dr. Blackstein be more specific with his blunt objects?

Gilbert's stomach cramped as he entered the principal's office. Still the same dark mahogany paneling, the same dour portraits of principals past, and the unnerving sense that corporal punishment lay just within. *This is ridiculous. I'm forty-seven years old.*

Scott Mackay lives with his wife and two children in Toronto, Canada, where he works in the follow-up and research section of the Ontario Cancer Institute. He's been writing for us since 1989, and has also contributed stories to *Great Canadian Murder and Mystery Stories* and other anthologies and journals. His novel *A Friend in Barcelona* is available in paperback from HarperCollins.

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I have no reason to feel nervous. I'm finished with Wentworth. I buried it years ago.

The inside door opened and out came the current principal, Mr. Raymond Cunliffe. And a woman: a pale tall creature in pink who looked as if she hadn't slept in a few days. She walked past Gilbert without so much as a glance, her eyes puffy and the rims of her nostrils red, wasted no goodbyes on the principal, and marched out of the room.

"Detective Gilbert?" said Cunliffe, extending his hand.

"That's right," said Gilbert. The two men shook hands. "I hope I'm not taking you away from anything."

Cunliffe glanced after the woman. "No," he said. "You'll have to excuse Ms. Szabo. I'm afraid she's received some rather troubling family news."

"I could have come later," said Gilbert.

"That's quite all right, Detective," said Cunliffe. "But we'll have to be brief." The principal looked at his watch. "I teach a history class in fifteen minutes."

"Whatever you say."

The two men went into Cunliffe's office and sat down. Gilbert tried to relax but found it difficult. "Maybe you can start with what you know about the night Todd Armitage was killed," he said.

Cunliffe gave him a curt nod. "I wasn't here the night of the murder, Detective, so I won't be much help," said Cunliffe, his tone clipped and impatient. "But I know the boys were having a late band practice in the Great Hall. You'd have to ask Mr. Atkins exactly what time they finished, but as far as I know, it was some time shortly after eight." Cunliffe ran his hand through his thinning chestnut hair. "Most of the boys are picked up out front by their parents. Some are picked up behind, by the Annex. I understand Todd's mother was away at a conference, and that his father was working late at the hospital, and that the family gardener, Mr. Bonilla, was to pick him up in the back parking lot. In fact, I believe it was Mr. Bonilla who discovered the boy lying dead on the playing field."

"It was." Gilbert shifted, still trying to make himself comfortable. Could the malign ambience of this place still bother him so much? "What kind of boy was Todd, Mr. Cunliffe? What kind of student? Was he well liked?"

Cunliffe leaned back and rubbed his hands together.

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"He wasn't an exceptional student, Detective Gilbert," he said. "I'm afraid he'd have disappointed his father had he lived. He's not medical-school material. His grades were average, he showed no special interest in any one subject, and he had no career ideas for himself. I'm not sure a college like Wentworth was the right place for him; I think he felt out of place here. Whether that made him bitter, I can't say. He had a wide circle of friends, but no real close friends."

"Did he have any enemies?"

"Enemies. That's a bit strong, Detective Gilbert. Perhaps a few of the boys disliked him, but as for enemies, no, certainly not."

"Who's his homeroom teacher?"

"Mr. Korb. He's away on leave at the moment. I've taken over Mr. Korb's grade twelves until he returns."

"Oh," said Gilbert. "Then how was Todd in class? Did he look as if he had something on his mind?"

"He liked to daydream," said Cunliffe. "He could concentrate when he had to. But I never saw him brooding. I'm sorry to disappoint you, Detective, but he was a very average boy. To the best of my knowledge, no one had any reason to kill him."

Gilbert looked out the lead-pane windows where six or seven sparrows darted toward the clock tower. Enemies. You could always have them. Especially here at Wentworth.

"Can I get a class list?" he asked. "I'd like to talk to some of the boys."

"Of course. Mrs. Ince will print one for you. I'm sorry I couldn't be of greater help. It's been a great tragedy, Detective. We have a tradition to uphold here at Wentworth College. We want the parents to feel their children are safe here. We would like to come out of this untarnished, Detective, and any assistance you can render in giving the case a quick and successful close will be greatly appreciated."

Gilbert shrugged. "I'll do what I can," he said.

"Splendid." Cunliffe rose. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I should really hurry to my class."

"Of course," said Gilbert. "By the way, do you ever hear from Mr. Lockridge?"

"Mr. Lockridge?"

"Jim Lockridge. He was the Phys. Ed. teacher here awhile back. I think he retired six or seven years ago."

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"I've been principal here for only three," said Cunliffe. "I've never met the man."

Gilbert shrugged again. "It's not important," he said.

No, not important. He walked past the Annex and headed toward the street nearest the playing field. Class of '65. A wide circle of friends but no real close ones. And enemies, yes, lots of enemies. *Forget it. I'm through with Wentworth. I buried it years ago.*

He started with the white stucco house across from the playing field.

He had no idea that Mrs. Pouncett would still be living there, and was surprised when the old woman answered the door. Her hair had turned silver and there were more lines creasing her face, but as she looked up at him he saw she still had the same shrewd inquisitive eyes.

"Yes?" she said.

He showed her his badge. "I'm Detective Barry Gilbert." He cocked his eyebrow in a friendly manner. "You don't remember me, do you?"

She looked at him closely. "No," she said. "I'm afraid I don't. Were you here earlier this week? There've been so many detectives I haven't been able to keep them straight."

He put his badge away. Of course she wouldn't remember him. It was thirty years ago. Why pursue it? He was acting like an idiot. Just drop it. "We're sorry to bother you again, Mrs. Pouncett. But we're just recanvassing the neighborhood to see if anybody's remembered anything else."

She raised her eyebrows.

"I'm afraid I haven't," she said. "As I told the young man on Tuesday, I only looked out my window twice, and I didn't see anything unusual."

Gilbert nodded.

"I was a student at Wentworth," he said. He couldn't leave it alone.

"Were you?" said the old woman. Was she delighted; or was she just trying to hide her pity?

"Thirty years ago," he said.

"That's a long time."

Out on the road, a street cleaner rumbled by, its yellow light flickering, hosing the gutter while it swept the debris up into its compressor; the driver looked bored.

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"I saw you often from the playing field," said Gilbert. "I thought you might have remembered me."

"No, I'm sorry, I don't."

"Do you remember a boy who came to your door badly beaten and without any clothes on?"

Mrs. Pouncett's eyes widened in alarm. "That was you?" she said.

Gilbert looked up the road, where the street cleaner made a U-turn, feeling once again all the pain and humiliation of that day. Forget it, Gilbert. Not important how Mr. Lockridge held him in a full nelson while the other boys pummeled him, then tied his clothes to the goalposts. He couldn't even remember his crime. It happened a long time ago. *You buried Wentworth years ago. Lockridge is most probably dead.*

"No," he said. "No, it wasn't. Just a classmate of mine. He never got the chance to thank you."

"The poor child," she said. "It was simply awful."

The street cleaner came back down the other way, eating the last of November's leaves. "He's all right now," said Gilbert. "I haven't seen him in a while, but I heard from him last Christmas, and I know he's all right." He took out a business card and handed it to Mrs. Pouncett. "You give me a call if you remember anything," he said.

"I most certainly will," she said.

Gilbert held the student interviews in the study hall. Nothing had changed. Row upon row of desks, the same gilded molding above, the oak lectern, and photographs of football teams going back to 1910. On this first day of December, the weather had turned cold, the sky was grey, and snowflakes tumbled to the barren earth, bursting on impact and blowing away in the wind.

Theodore Kirwin approached him down the main aisle, his gait slow, apprehensive, his eyes nearly lost behind his black-rimmed glasses. Gilbert checked his list. Like Todd, Theodore was seventeen, but he looked much younger, closer to fourteen. The boy stopped a few paces from Gilbert's desk and studied the detective with grave blue eyes.

"Mr. Cunliffe says we have to talk to you," he said, his voice warbling and shy.

"I won't take up too much of your time, Theodore," said Gilbert. "I just want to know how well you knew Todd. That's all.

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And whether there's anything I should know about him. Please. Sit down."

The boy sat down and took a nervous glance around the study hall. And Gilbert knew that this boy was different, that he was one of those unfortunate few who were picked on, that his innate lack of style worked against him, that through no fault of his own he had turned himself into one of the resident scapegoats. He turned to Gilbert and leaned closer.

"I'm glad he's dead," he said, in a confiding half-whisper. "Mr. Cunliffe talks of this big tragedy. Trust me. It isn't. Half of us are glad to see Todd Armitage gone. I would have killed him myself if I'd had the guts. He made our lives miserable."

This was indeed different. He leaned toward Theodore Kirwin in the same confiding manner, hoping to put the boy at ease, hoping to get more.

"How did he make you miserable?" he asked, his voice calm and encouraging.

Out in the hall, the recess bell rang.

"He made us give him money," said the boy. "That was his thing. He kept a schedule of payments. He was very organized about it. If we couldn't pay, there'd always be a penalty. You see this finger? You see how it's slightly crooked? That happened last year. That was one of my penalties. I can't quite manage the clarinet now. At least not the way I could."

"Todd did that to you?"

"Oh, he was smart. He knew I wanted to go to music school. Now I don't think I can. Not with this finger. And I know a half-dozen other boys who'll give you similar stories. You don't know what a relief it is to have Todd gone. He finally got what was coming to him."

Later that day, Gilbert sat at his desk flipping through the three most recent Wentworth College yearbooks, looking for more clues to Todd Armitage's character. In one photograph, Todd pinned an opponent to the floor in a wrestling match, his opponent's face showing both shock and pain. And here he was in a band photograph, on concert night, standing up, trumpet in hand, singled out to take a bow. Here was yet another with Todd, in design class, clowning it up with a beret, a fake goatee, and a paintbrush. A teenage extortionist. But what else? Some-

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one who always had to be on top? Someone who always had to be the boss and get his own way?

He flipped to the next page, where he found a picture of Raymond Cunliffe, in his regular business suit, but wearing a football helmet and holding a trophy in the air. He was surrounded by jubilant players. And the pale tall woman, Ms. Szabo, who had been in his office a few days ago, stood beside him, looking up at him with wide adoring eyes. Gilbert gazed more closely at Ms. Szabo. The slavish adulation in her eyes seemed wholly inappropriate in this scene of celebration. She was proud of Cunliffe, yes, but her body seemed poised in an attitude of worship. Who was this woman? What position did she occupy?

He flipped back to the staff photographs and found her picture on the third page. Julia Szabo. Art, Graphics, and Design Teacher. The only woman on the teaching staff.

A knock came at his door and in walked his partner, Lieutenant Joe Lombardo. Lombardo was a short and genial man, all muscle, no fat, about fifteen years Gilbert's junior.

"Sorry I kept you waiting," said Lombardo.

"That's all right, Joe," said Gilbert. "What do you have?"

Lombardo slid a report onto Gilbert's desk. "Not much. No latent fingerprints. Nothing that would suggest a struggle. But we did find three extraneous hairs."

"And?"

"Some identifiers. Mouse brown turning to grey. Thin. Forensic's going to run some tests to determine if it's male or female. Other than that, we found some fibers. They're synthetic, so Forensic's working on that too. They're backlogged; it might be a week."

Gilbert nodded; he glanced through Lombardo's report.

"Anything on Theodore Kirwin?" he asked.

A crease came to Lombardo's brow and he looked reluctant to answer. "As a matter of fact, Juvenile has a file on him. Now I know this looks suspicious, Barry, but I honestly don't think he had anything to do with Todd's murder."

"What do you have?"

Lombardo twisted his lips to one side, now resigned. "Theodore spent two years in reform school. He pushed another kid in front of a bus, apparently in a fit of anger. I spoke to his former social worker. She wasn't sure whether he had his anger under control yet."

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"Maybe he killed Todd in another fit of anger. They were both at band practice that night. And after what we learned about Todd, Theodore certainly has motive."

"Half the kids in the school have motive. And there's no physical evidence that links Kirwin to the scene of the crime. These grey hairs, they have nothing to do with Kirwin. And I doubt whether the fibers do either."

Gilbert picked up a pencil and tapped it against his desk. "At this point, Joe, I can't take him off the list. We have few enough suspects as it is."

Wentworth was going to hide its secrets behind its dour stone walls and its facade of honor and integrity.

Joe Lombardo went to get a late lunch and Gilbert was left alone to ponder the problem.

Behind the facade of honor and integrity, cruelty and indifference were commonplace. Having gone through Wentworth College thirty years ago—a nightmare journey where fear had found a permanent perch and cynicism had taken root—he wasn't at all surprised that something like murder could happen there. He was only surprised that it hadn't happened sooner.

Gilbert was about to leave for home when his mail came. Among the several large brown interoffice envelopes was one from Dr. Blackstein, an envelope discreetly marked in the doctor's tiny handwriting.

Inside, he found clinical photographs of Todd's fractured skull. Dr. Blackstein, in his note, instructed Gilbert to pay careful attention to the unique markings on the boy's skull, in particular, those impressions which had been enhanced and magnified by the lab's computer in Photograph C. Gilbert's hand tightened around the photograph as he peered more closely. Dr. Blackstein was finally going to get specific with his blunt objects.

What he saw was unmistakable. Words. And parts of words. *orth Barons went on to win the ma . . .* Words and parts of words, embedded right into the boy's skull.

Gilbert again stood under the crab apple tree at the end of the playing field. What was it with that tree? Why did it seem to have the personality of an axe murderer? Why did he feel as if it would ghoulishly come to life if he were to turn his back on it? Memories. Bad ones. Of injustice. Of punishment. Of innocent

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victims. All so long ago. He took a few steps toward the crab apple tree. Like Theodore Kirwin, he had been one of the unfortunate few who had been picked on. A resident scapegoat.

From the other side of the field he saw Mrs. Pouncett walking toward him. She lifted a white hanky and waved it in the air.

They met in the middle of the field. Low grey clouds bristled in the sky.

"I saw you standing here," she said, "so I thought I'd come out and see you."

"Oh?" said Gilbert. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"I don't know whether this is important or not." She stopped to catch her breath. "It was the lights, you see."

"What lights?"

She pointed, raising her arthritic arm with effort. "Over there. In the Annex. Ms. Szabo's design class. The lights were on the night of the murder."

"Is that unusual?"

"Oh, yes. The lights are never on at night."

"Maybe the janitor went in to clean up," suggested Gilbert.

"No. Mr. Hobson cleans up in the afternoon. The Annex isn't used in the afternoon. Maybe they had something special going on. Who knows. I just thought you might like to know."

Gilbert looked up at the old stone Annex, which stood raised on an incline above the field. Design class. Back in his day they called it art class.

"Thank you, Mrs. Pouncett," he said. "You've been a great help."

With Mrs. Pouncett gone, Gilbert climbed the hill and peered in through the lead-pane windows of the design class. Two dozen grade-nine boys in beige smocks were drawing quick charcoal sketches of each other. Ms. Julia Szabo sat on a stool near a back room, staring, preoccupied, her hands folded into small white fists on her lap. She looked tired, worn out, had dark patches under her eyes, and her skin was lusterless. Gilbert walked around to the door and went inside.

Ms. Szabo came out of her trance and looked across the room at Gilbert. A few of the boys glanced around but otherwise showed no interest. Ms. Szabo slid off her stool.

"Hello," she said, her tone friendly but formal. "Can I help you?" She obviously didn't remember him from Cunliffe's office. "Are you a parent?"

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"No," he said. He pulled out his badge. "I'm Detective Barry Gilbert. I'm in charge of the Todd Armitage investigation. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions?"

For just a second, she looked as if she was going to cry. "Certainly," she said. "Ask anything you like."

"Maybe we could go into your office," said Gilbert, nodding toward the back room.

"Oh, that's not my office," she said. "That's just a dingy back room."

Gilbert looked around the class. "You have quite a crew of young Picassos here," he said.

She gave him a brittle smile. "I try to teach them an appreciation of art. Unfortunately, there aren't many who care."

Gilbert shrugged. "I understand these classrooms are used only in the morning."

"That's right," said Ms. Szabo.

"And that Mr. Hobson comes in to clean them in the afternoon."

"As far as I know."

"Are the classrooms ever used at night?"

"Not that I know of. I'm never here at night. Mr. Cunliffe might be able to give you a better idea than I."

Gilbert nodded. "Do you ever use a printing press in design class?" he asked.

"A printing press?"

"Yes. Maybe you use one to print the school newspaper."

"No," she said. She pointed to three PCs and a laser printer against the opposite wall. "We print the newspaper by computer now. Maybe years ago they used a printing press. I wouldn't know. I've been here only three years."

"Ms. Szabo, we have a witness who says the design class lights were on the night of Todd's murder." Gilbert stared directly into her eyes. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

She shook her head. "I already told you. I'm never here at night. I wouldn't know, I really wouldn't."

The woman was hiding something, he knew she was; yet she seemed an unlikely killer, certainly not a woman with the size and strength to chase down a brute like Todd Armitage and bash his brains out. Maybe the killer was Theodore Kirwin after all.

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He leaned forward in his chair, picked up a two-year-old Wentworth yearbook, and opened it to the middle photograph. Here was a group shot of the entire school, 320 boys and 25 staff. Why didn't Cunliffe know about Todd's extortionist activities, especially if his activities were as widespread as they seemed to have been? Was Ms. Szabo one of Todd's victims? Was that why she had acted so strangely? Or was this just a random killing, committed by a suspect in every way a stranger to Todd, a mugger or a punk? He gazed at the book, and something odd struck him about this photograph. Odd, the way this whole murder was odd. Troubling in the way only Wentworth College could be troubling. He took out his magnifying glass and had a closer look, concentrating on Mr. Cunliffe.

And at last he felt as if he had some direction.

It was a question of who had a key to the design class. Mr. Hobson definitely had one.

The janitor pulled his key out of his pocket and opened the door for Gilbert.

"A bad business, this," said the janitor, his voice thick with a Scottish brogue. "There's only two others who have a key, so far as I know. Ms. Szabo and Mr. Cunliffe. Here you are, sir. Look all you like. I'll be going home soon, so if you could pull the latch closed when you're through."

"I'll do that, Mr. Hobson." The two men entered the design class. At five-thirty, it was already dark, and they had to turn on the lights. "Tell me, when did Mr. Cunliffe start dyeing his hair?"

An impish smile came to Mr. Hobson's face and he put his hands on his hips. "A recent affectation, that. Came to school Monday morning with his hair all brown like that. Can't imagine who he's trying to impress. Unless it's Ms. Szabo. And him a married man."

"They have a thing, don't they?"

The janitor maintained his impish smile. "Wouldn't know," he said. "I don't listen to gossip."

Gilbert watched Mr. Hobson go. When did Mr. Cunliffe start dyeing his hair? Because it certainly hadn't been dyed in the yearbook photo. And so strange, when he was not only principal but also Todd's homeroom teacher, that he shouldn't know about Todd's unsavory enterprises. The grey and brown hair. Did he have a match in Mr. Cunliffe, or had he reached the point where

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he had to grasp at even the remotest possibilities?

He walked to the back room. Walked to the back room because he knew Ms. Szabo was lying, knew that Wentworth had a printing press, a hand-operated platen press, that it was kept in this back room, and that the letters were locked in a heavy steel chase for printing, a chase heavy enough to crush a skull.

He opened the door and turned on the light.

Everything looked the same as before, but now there was a cot. Hobson didn't listen to gossip, but Mr. Cunliffe would have a lot to lose if Todd found out he was having an adulterous affair with Ms. Szabo. And him a married man. Gilbert opened the cabinet next to the utility sink; and there it was, the old printing press. He pulled out the chase, now emptied of its letters—as a unit, it weighed fifty pounds. One blow to the head, that's all it would take.

He inspected the chase carefully. Recently cleaned. But what was this? A few blond hairs caught in the corner, a speckle of blood along the side. Todd came out of band practice, he saw the lights, he discovered Mr. Cunliffe and Ms. Szabo on the cot. Mr. Cunliffe, understanding just what a troublemaker Todd was, looked around for the most convenient weapon, found the chase, pursued Todd across the field, and killed him. A reasonable enough scenario, but unless he got a confession, it would never stand up.

The noon-hour bell rang shrill and persistent the next day. Students left the design class in ones and twos, all wearing white shirts, grey flannels, black Oxfords, and burgundy V-neck sweaters. When the last straggler left, Gilbert got out of his car and walked across the parking lot.

He found Ms. Szabo inside, putting things away. She stopped her tidying and stared at Gilbert.

"I thought you might come back," she said, her voice somber.

He nodded. "I found the printing press," he said.

"I know you did."

"And the chase," he said. "Can we sit down?"

Outside, a boy rode by on a bicycle, ringing his bell.

"I don't see why. We have nothing to discuss."

"We're going to arrest Mr. Cunliffe for the murder of Todd Armitage," he said.

"That's ridiculous."

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"Is it?" he asked. "We've run some tests on the chase. We know it's the murder weapon. We've also got a match on Cunliffe's hair. Our witness will testify she saw the lights on in the classroom on the night Todd Armitage was killed. We have a statement from Mr. Hobson that you and Cunliffe have used this classroom for illicit rendezvous in the past. We'll have the prosecuting attorney argue that Todd discovered you and Cunliffe, and that Cunliffe went after him with the chase because he knew just what Todd was liable to do if he didn't. I'm sorry, Ms. Szabo, but the charge will be murder. If you don't help us, that is. We'll drop the charge to manslaughter if you cooperate."

Tears brimmed in Ms. Szabo's eyes, but she quickly got them under control. He saw she was struggling, and Gilbert thought she was going to call his bluff; but then her shoulders sank, and her hair fell in front of her face, and she finally slouched into a chair.

"I'm not an attractive woman, Detective Gilbert," she began. "I'm much too pale and storklike ever to be considered an attractive woman, and I haven't had many suitors, only one or two before Raymond came along." A wistful grin came to her face and she tucked her hair behind her ear. "Raymond was the only one who ever took me seriously. You don't know how wonderful that made me feel after so many years of loneliness. Once you get to know him you see that he's a man of great intellect and appeal, and also a sensitive man, perhaps too sensitive. I adore the man, absolutely adore him, and because I know he's so sensitive, I've always tried to protect him. But that's not easy. He's fought so hard to become the principal of this school, and he's desperately afraid of anything that will threaten his position."

"Is this where Todd comes in?"

She stared out the window, where Mr. Hobson had strung some Christmas lights around a blue spruce at the edge of the parking lot.

"You've got it wrong, Detective," she said, her voice now dreamy. "Todd's known about us for months now. He'd been blackmailing us since September. He was wrecking our plans and making us miserable. Raymond was going to leave his wife . . . but he . . . well, never mind, I won't get into that right now. It's all such a long sad story. Todd was killing him. Each day, Raymond came to school a little weaker, a little more dispirited.

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Then he got ill last month. Very ill. The load was just too much to carry."

"So he killed Todd." Gilbert shook his head. "This doesn't sound like manslaughter. This sounds like murder."

"You've still got it wrong, Detective," she said. "All I ever wanted was to protect Raymond. He was nowhere near the school the night of Todd's murder."

"So he says."

"But I was. I was right here in this room. I waited for Todd. And when he came across the parking lot I called to him. I told him I needed help getting the printing press out. When he knelt down beside the cabinet, I smashed him over the head with the chase. That's all it took. He was dead after one blow. I wrapped him in a blanket and wheeled him out to the playing field in that cart over there."

Should have resigned from this case. Wentworth brought back too many bad memories. Of scapegoats. Of victims. Of people punished for no good reason. Gilbert sat in his chair staring out at the snow. Christmas was a scant three days away. Julia Szabo would stand trial for the murder of Todd Armitage some time in the new year. But he still wasn't convinced. Had she, in an ultimate act of sacrifice, tried to protect Raymond Cunliffe one last time?

That's what he didn't like about Wentworth. The lies and deceit. The promises made and the promise broken. The shining future that turned too quickly into a sordid past. The brutality of the place. A place that spawned a blackmailing monster like Todd. A place that would silently stand by and watch an innocent woman go to jail for the rest of her life for a crime she didn't commit. A school that would turn its back, thirty years ago, on a beaten and naked boy.

Joe Lombardo came into his office and dropped a manila folder on his desk.

"Those are the latest results," said the lieutenant. "The fibers found on Todd's jacket match the fibers of that blanket."

Gilbert shrugged. "What about the cart tracks?"

Lombardo raised his eyebrows. "We couldn't find any," he said. "And we searched every square inch of that field. Relax, Barry. You're too hard on yourself. We got a confession. What more do you want?"

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"It's a bad design, Joe, that's all. None of it quite fits. What about the hair?"

"It probably came from the blanket."

"But you can't be certain?"

Lombardo looked away, exasperated. "No. But she's already agreed to plead guilty. That's as snug a fit as you're going to get."

Gilbert leaned forward and absently tapped the manila folder. "Thanks, Joe. You did a good job."

Lombardo hesitated, then finally smiled. "You're welcome," he said. "You want a coffee? I'm going down."

"Sure."

When Lombardo was gone, Gilbert rose from his desk and stared out the window. With murder, there was always more than one victim. It was never an open-and-shut case. Cunliffe was going to let her take the fall. What could Gilbert do about that? And maybe he was wrong. Maybe Julia Szabo had really killed the boy. Maybe that pale and feeble woman had actually lifted that monstrous chase and hit Todd over the head with it. But if that was the case, why did he feel so bad about this one? And what about the cart tracks? With the ground so muddy, there should have been cart tracks. Murder wasn't a puzzle. The pieces never fit exactly the way you wanted. He turned away from the window, trying not to let the snow depress him too much. All he could do was turn his back on Wentworth. Again. And maybe this time, even if his fear and cynicism remained, he would at least be able to bury Wentworth for good. ●

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

Continued from page 98

"Professor Edwards was both victim and murderer," Stanton said. "He sent the first two boxes of sweets to his rivals, and was about to send a third. But the man was totally *absent-minded*. When he started to work on his self-hypsosis dieting book, his hand idly reached for a chocolate, one he had filled with poison a few hours before. He died before he could complete the final word of his title: *You Are Going to Diet*."

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Art by Steve Cavallo

DOUBLE EVENT

by Phil Lovesey

"I could kill for a drink right now, Inspector."

David Knight turned to face the stranger. "Journalist, are you, love?" he said, swiftly finishing a pint of real-ale, wondering just how they managed to track him down each time. This case had turned him into a legitimate target for freelance hacks looking for any new angle on the whole dreadful business. "I said all I could at the official press conferences. Can't help you. I'm sorry."

She smiled. "Oh no, Inspector, I'm not one of those press people who would hound a man to his favourite pub for an interview. Even if it is rather off the beaten track. I notice you don't drink with the boys from the station anymore. Is it this serial-killing thing? Do they resent you heading the team? Quite young to be taking on such a gruesome responsibility, Inspector."

Knight rose from his stool without looking at the woman.

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"If you'll excuse me, it's been a long week. You can read all about it in the papers."

"I don't trust the papers, Inspector. They have a tendency to omit some of the more relevant details. The second one, for instance, the old man, they said nothing about the missing ears, did they? Now what can I get you to drink, Inspector? Or may I call you David?" He said nothing for a moment, scrutinising the woman, using his police training to identify a motive. First to strike him was her extraordinary plainness. Medium-length mousey-brown hair crowned an almost featureless face, made only slightly memorable by its very dullness. Perhaps she was known to him. Certainly she would be easy to forget. He opted for the most obvious tack.

"I'm sorry, do we know each other, Miss . . . ?"

"Only by way of association, David. I have a proposition for you. It needn't take long, half an hour at the most. It's a pint of bitter for you, isn't it?"

Knight nodded and watched as she paid for their two drinks from a roll of money, placing the loose change back in a leather shoulder bag. He estimated she must have been carrying close to a thousand pounds with her. A bribe, perhaps, or part payment from a newspaper for his version of the murders? Nothing would surprise him anymore. From his first announcement that the crimes were linked, a media circus had steamrollered into his life. The situation was now almost desperate, with two more killings in the last month, and the public's lust for the gory details strangling the investigation itself. As a result, he had ordered a press blackout on some of the more sensational aspects, for fear of the uproar they would cause. After a twelve-

Last year Phil Lovesey, son of author Peter Lovesey, debuted in our Department of First Stories. A few short months later, he was named one of seven finalists in the professional category of MWA's 50th Anniversary Short Story Contest—a stunning accomplishment when you consider that he was competing with some of the top names in the genre. "Double Event" is the story that brought him that honor. ¶

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week investigation at a cost of hundreds of thousands of pounds, David Knight had collected over seventeen hundred statements from witnesses, and a series of migraine headaches.

He sat wearily back on his stool, watching his companion do likewise. The pretty blond barmaid smiled knowingly, having seen the situation many times before. Perhaps he was being picked up, so what? The truth was he didn't really care, feeling just the tiniest bit flattered by the situation. It was half-past six, and the pub was filling fast.

"Now that I have your attention, let me introduce myself. My name's Jenny Miles, and I think I'm safe in saying that I am the woman of your dreams." Knight watched her sip provocatively at her tomato juice.

"Don't tell me, love," he said, warming to the puzzle—a welcome distraction from the killings. "You're on the game and I busted you for soliciting some years back. You saw me on the television recently and sought me out. A revenge thing."

"Nice try, Inspector. I'm flattered you think I could make it as a prostitute. I'm not what you would call classically sexy, after all."

"It takes all sorts," said Knight defensively. "Go on, Miss Miles, surprise me, what's our connection?"

"I like to think of it as a blood tie, David. I'm your murderer. I am the pub killer." She held his stare intently, watching as the revelation sunk in. Immediately his eyes clouded over and his face broke into a smile. From his pocket he pulled out a packet of cigarettes, lighting one and exhaling slowly.

"Well, congratulations, Jenny," he said sarcastically, "you've just joined a sick little society of creeps, nutters, and gore-hounds who by their own sad confessions prove themselves to be lonely, inadequate assholes, making my job twice as hard as it already is. But I must admit, the approach was novel, by any standards."

Jenny returned the smile, waving the offered cigarette aside. "You're an easy man to follow, David, despite the little charade with swapping cars. I've watched it happen for three days. Sneaking out of the back of the police station into the unmarked car to give reporters the slip. And then drinking alone in a crowded pub for anonymity. Always the same, every night, just two pints of beer and then home. The easiest creature to catch

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is the creature of habit. Which is why you'll never catch me—sorry, the pub killer."

"I'm starting to get irritated with all this now. I don't like being followed, I don't like having my time wasted, and I don't like the way this conversation is developing. Whatever you are, journalist, private eye, or mental case, please understand that I won't divulge any details of any cases currently under investigation. Now I would appreciate it if you made yourself scarce. If I see you following me or any other of my colleagues, I will personally bring you in for obstructing an enquiry. Understand?"

She leaned closer, surprising Knight with her intimacy. "The first murder occurred on October the fourth last year at The Goose, Walpole Green. The victim was John Stannard, forty-two, struck down in the car park some time around ten that night. Next the old man, who I subsequently discovered was Alfred Teddings. He was too easy, really, so I took his ears. Which brings us to The Queen's Head, Dewsbury, in February this year. Richard Allen, fifty-one, fatally discovers the folly of offering to change the tyre on my car. Not that it was mine at all, I just saw him arrive at the pub and step out so willing to help a lady in distress. He shook for a while afterwards as I recall, and I had to stand well back to avoid being showered in . . . well, you can guess, Inspector. Blood has never really been a problem, providing you strike from behind and stand back for a minute before going in again. Some of them moan a little, but nothing out of the ordinary for a pub car park at night. Then you started to mount vigils on all pub car parks, a hopeless task really, as I no longer had to go inside to lure my victims. I told PC Collins I thought I had an oil leak, and would he take a look? He obliged, and he died. I had more time with him to collect my trophies. You didn't tell that to the press, did you, David?"

"Where the hell are you getting your information, lady?" hissed Knight, fearing a news leak of career-ending proportions.

"From the scenes of the crimes. Please call me Jenny, there's really no need for any antagonism. I've come here to present myself on a plate for you, a weekend bonus for the clueless detective. Fancy another, Inspector?"

"You're coming to the station right now. I've no idea what this is about, but I intend to find out."

Jenny placed her hand on Knight's thigh, and squeezed gently.

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"Move me from this stool and I'll scream 'rape' louder than the Vienna Boy's Choir. At the station I'll deny everything, then run straight to the press. How's it going to look, David, pulling in an innocent woman you molested in a pub for a series of murders you yourself said were most likely committed by a man? I think the gentlemen of the press would draw their own conclusions, don't you? Perhaps the pressure is getting to Inspector Knight."

The tired inspector said nothing, removing the offending hand from his leg. So the bitch wanted to play games; have a little fun at his expense. What she was suggesting seemed too ludicrous to contemplate. Yet she'd obviously done her research very thoroughly, maybe with one of his own team. His mind raced as he tried to picture which of his colleagues could have wished to betray such vital evidence. She had been quite accurate about most things so far. He did avoid the press at all costs; he did leave by the back door and change cars; he didn't drink with his fellow officers anymore. The more he reflected, the more he felt it possible that he was being set up from the inside. It wouldn't have been the first time a senior officer on a case had been brought down by a jealous colleague. It was time for a change of tactics.

"Jenny," he said diplomatically, "let's review the evidence, shall we?"

"Fine by me."

"You're confessing to the pub killings?"

"Incorrect," snapped Jenny, waving a note to attract the blond barmaid, who was quick to step closer, interested, perhaps, in how the pickup was progressing. "I'm telling you I'm the killer. You draw your own conclusions."

"I see," Knight replied, trying to enjoy the charade. "But can you prove you are?"

"Can you prove I'm not?"

"Cheers. Here's to you," said Knight, raising his glass. "Technically, I don't suppose I can, not right here and now. But we're fairly sure of certain things. The force of the blows was considerable."

"And inconsistent with a woman? Inspector, how naive."

"You just don't fit the psychological profile, Jenny. I would say you are the last person in England we're looking for in connection with this case."

"It *has* caused me some amusement, David, while I am about my business." Jenny talked quite freely, their conversation made

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unintelligible to others by the frenzied din of other revellers. "I just love all that 'psychological profiling' bullshit. Don't you realise how foolish you appear on television, spouting all that pseudo-American claptrap? Underneath, David, both you and I know that you are no nearer to catching me now than you were last October."

Knight stubbed out his cigarette, clearly irritated by the whole business.

"Okay, Miss Pub Killer, why you?"

"Because I enjoy it. Immensely."

"That's it?"

"Does there have to be any other reason?"

"Why pubs?"

"It makes it easier. If you've ever killed a sober person, then tried a drunken one afterwards, you'd be surprised how much easier it is."

"Why take the old man's ears?"

"I thought it would give your psychologists some fun."

"What happened to PC Collins's left eye?"

"Trick question, Inspector, shame on you. I popped his right eye in his trouser pocket, the left stayed where it was."

"Why men?"

"They're easy, but a woman wouldn't be impossible."

"So why tell me all this?"

"Congratulations, Inspector, we finally arrive at a relevant question." Jenny laughed, her fingers tapping on the bar to the rhythm of the jukebox. "It's mostly pride, really. You've been saying some pretty inaccurate things about me recently. I want you to see how wrong you are, how helpless you are to stop it happening the next time."

Knight lit another cigarette, chilled by the possibilities beginning to creep across his mind. "If you're who you say you are, you'll be easy to find. I'll have a squad car over here with just a phone call."

"Tut, tut, Inspector," Jenny teased, "I'll be gone in seconds. Lost in the crowds. And what will you have to go on? My fingerprints aren't on record. I haven't been to a dentist in thirteen years. I'm untraceable, like so many others. Tell me, what description would you give? Middle-aged woman, medium build and height with no distinguishing characteristics? You don't honestly believe I told you my real name, do you? I might just

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cut and dye my hair tomorrow. It's possible to do the whole thing at home now for complete privacy. Am I married? Single? Got any kids? You have no idea, do you? Poor David, so close to the end of the tunnel, but blind to the light. Here, I want you to read this."

"What's this rubbish? More little games?" said Knight, unimpressed.

"It could be your biggest break yet."

He took the envelope, noticing the Fleet Street address and feeling he was finally getting somewhere. She must be somebody in the press. However, as he took the folded square of paper and began to read, he realised he wasn't so sure.

Dear Sir,

A short note re the recent pub killings. I thought it might be newsworthy to inform the British press that last night I met with Inspector Knight, who so ineptly heads the current investigation into my handiwork. Upon informing him of my identity, he refuted my claim in what can only be described as an offensive manner. Having called my pride into question, I decided to prove my story to him. I challenged Inspector Knight to choose my next victim at random from the assembled customers in the Golden Fleece public house.

The Victim He Chose Was.....
(uncanny, eh?)

So sorry that it had to end this way, again.

Yours sincerely,
JILL THE RIPPER

"Nice touch, Jenny. You fancy a slice of Saucy Jack's fame, do you?"

Jenny shrugged, trying her best to look modest.

Knight pushed the letter back. If, as he suspected, the woman was deranged, then she could be dangerous in her own right. He made a note to check the outpatient lists of the local mental institutions. But she was right; describing her wouldn't be easy.

"So David, why don't you choose me a victim?"

"You're crazy."

"I mean it."

"No way."

"What's wrong, Inspector? Anyone you like."

"This is ridiculous. You don't have to prove anything. I'm will-

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ing to believe you. Are you taking any medication at the moment?"

She drained her glass, regarding him disdainfully. "If you wish to humour me so obviously, I'd be obliged if you did as I asked."

"You know I can't do that, Jenny," Knight replied, fearful of upsetting her in a public place.

"Because part of you suspects I am telling the truth?"

"I'm a police officer, for God's sake. You know that. You're an intelligent woman."

"So it's flattery now. How predictable. Come on, David, grab the world by its balls! Take a few chances. If I turn out to be a hoaxer, then the letter will be ignored. You'll simply deny ever meeting me. You lose nothing but half an hour of your time. I'll strike you a bargain. Choose tonight's unlucky contestant, and I'll tell you everything you want to know."

He mulled the deal over in his mind. Her logic was beginning to unsettle him. Technically, he couldn't lose out, and maybe by playing along he could buy some time. If he could distract her he could use his mobile phone.

The victims had all been men so far. Right.

"How about the girl at the table in the corner."

"With the black hair, green jacket, and matching boyfriend?" said Jenny, warming to the task. "Stay right here. I won't be a minute, I just need the name."

He watched as she made her way through the crowd to the tiny round table. She kept him in view, even signalling when she reached the young couple. He waved back, suddenly aware his armpits were running with sweat. He decided against using the phone. She had to be a crank, nothing more. He saw her chat to the girl for about thirty seconds, laughing out loud several times, then made her way back to the crowded bar before finally sitting back on the stool. From the bag which had never left her shoulder throughout, she produced the letter and a pen.

"The name's Mulligan. Susan Mulligan. Thinks I once went on holiday to the Algarve with her. I feel quite insulted really."

Jenny committed the name to the typewritten letter, sealed it in the envelope, and produced five more bank notes from her bag.

"Excuse me, Inspector. This won't take long." He watched in grim fascination as once more she threw herself on the mercy of a total stranger, this time a young man drinking alone at the end of the bar. Knight saw the face light up as Jenny produced

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the money and envelope together. An instant later, the young man, the letter, and the money were gone.

"He's taking it straight to the sorting office. I couldn't risk a postbox. It would be too easy to retrieve by a police inspector with egg on his face, wouldn't you say?"

"I'd say you seem to have thought of everything, Jenny. It's a rare privilege to watch an expert at work."

"Your sarcasm is just a front, David," Jenny replied perceptively. "Underneath beats the heart of a worried man, beating faster by the minute. Questions race around that overworked brain. Is she mad? Is she telling the truth? What if she's both? How can I get help? It's all too late. We've already set the wheels in motion. If you'll observe—" She pointed towards the loving couple. "—Miss Mulligan is currently being plied with half-pints of strong cider by her amorous boyfriend. I'm not much of a human biologist, but as sure as I'm the woman you're looking for, Susan will be needing the toilet within the next quarter of an hour or so. Providing there's no one else around, I'll do for her in one of the cubicles. It's just a matter of waiting now, I'm afraid."

Knight nodded as politely as he could, ordering more drinks for them both.

"You don't believe a word of it, do you?"

"I believe you believe it, Jenny. And I believe you might need help. You're not a killer, just confused at the moment. I've been in this business for years, love. I know how it works. There's a notoriety about crimes like these that certain people can find very appealing. It gives them fame, power, a sense of control. The killer acts outside the system, disregarding its rules. Some people spend their whole lives trying to do just that. And then a rare chance comes their way. Somehow they convince themselves they are the killer, and their self-esteem rockets with their newfound ruthlessness. But then they have to get the killer's respect for themselves. They covet the fear he leaves in his wake. And they tell someone. Usually a police officer."

He watched as Jenny turned away, biting nervously at her bottom lip. Momentarily his heart went out to her. She was, he thought, just as much a victim of the killer as the victims themselves, striving to attain self-respect from the bloodied coattails of a homicidal lunatic. He suddenly saw just how much he shared with her, a life made ghastly by the deeds of another. In that single, silent moment between them, Knight actually cared

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for her. The irony wasn't lost on him, she craving notoriety at any cost; he, anonymity.

Jenny's shoulders began to shake, and he found himself reaching toward her.

"You think I'm crying, don't you?" The insult flew at him like a cornered cat. "I'm very touched, Inspector, really, but I find this whole situation rather amusing. You still don't get it, do you?"

Knight finished his drink, turning to the grinning face.

"Right again, Jenny. I don't get it at all. But I'm not listening to this bullshit any longer. Get a life of your own, and get out of mine!"

Jenny heard none of it, staring intently through the crowd toward the table in the corner. The cider had evidently done its work as predicted, and the girl rose from her chair rather unsteadily, kissed her boyfriend, and headed towards the toilets.

"This is where I come in, David," said Jenny, placing her empty glass on the bar and rising from the stool. "I could murder another one. Couldn't I?"

She left without saying another word, slipping through the smoke and laughter with astonishing speed. Through the crowd, Knight just made out the long dark hair of his "victim" as Jenny followed her through the door.

He suddenly felt quite uneasy.

"Same again, is it, love?" The blond barmaid stood waiting for his order.

"Not for me," he flustered. Surely there was no possible way she was going to . . . "A tomato juice for the lady." He stared intently at the toilet door. Any second now, he convinced himself, both women would reappear. His fears would be allayed by the simple sight of a young woman walking back to her boyfriend.

"That's a pound exactly." He paid the grinning girl, amused no doubt by the distress caused by such surface triviality. "I'm sure she'll be back in a minute, love," she added, winking at him for good measure.

Eventually the door opened. It had been nearly four minutes. The boyfriend had seemed unconcerned throughout, playing idly with the rim of his glass while watching the screaming video jukebox. Knight craned his head. It was Jenny, returning alone, bag over her shoulder as usual. But as he watched her make her way back towards him, he noticed something disturbingly different about her. She wore a pair of black leather gloves.

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"Well, that's that, then," she said as she sat back on her stool. Knight stared grimly past, riveted on the distant doorway. "She's not coming out, Inspector. It's all over. Though this does change the pattern rather, it not being in a car park. Still, it can't be helped. Look at the boyfriend, waiting patiently, so gloriously oblivious to it all. Tomorrow there won't be a TV station in the land that won't want his story. He sits there, a celebrity waiting to happen. And it's all down to us. Cheers."

"What have you done to her, Jenny?" Knight demanded, his throat drying by the second. She sipped at the drink, savouring the moment.

"Well, in layman's terms, I guess you could say I . . ." She paused, searching the air for the right expression. ". . . snuffed out Miss Mulligan's lights. Your pathologist will give you the technical details. It all went quite smoothly."

Knight sat in silence, appalled. He watched as she removed the gloves, placing them back inside the leather bag. His mind had virtually shut down, reeling under the possibility that murder had been committed as he had sat on a barstool and waited. He looked towards the boy, noticing him glance at his watch with an air of annoyance.

"Now it's my turn to review the evidence, David," said Jenny, clearly enjoying the business. "It's decision time. Half an hour ago, you and I were strangers. In that time, I've told you many things about myself. Intimate things. I think you've had time enough to make up your mind. Am I the pub killer or not? There's really only one way to find out, isn't there? Just the one direction the investigation can take." She pointed towards the toilets. "Through that door, David, lies your answer. But is it dead or alive? And dare you risk charging into the ladies' and making yourself a laughingstock? It's a tough decision, it really is."

"You love these little games, don't you?" said Knight with contempt. "Making a fool out of me?"

"Now, David, where would be the challenge in that? Throughout every stage of my investigation, you seem to have embraced bungling as your main tactic. You even assumed I was a man! Let me tell you a tiny bit more. Tomorrow morning, you'll be off this case. Fleet Street will have a new heroine—Jill the Ripper—and you'll be the main witness! I do look forward to your description. They'll broadcast it, naturally, giving me an exact model of what not to look like. And what next? Your experts

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dusting this glass for prints? Dust away! I'm not on any records. You don't know my address, my age, my status, my name—you know nothing, and you'll never, ever find me. But I'll still keep doing it, the toll will rise, until one day I'll grow bored of it all, and 'Saucy Jill' will retire by the coast with just a ghastly clutch of memories. I kill because I can. I kill because it's all made so easy for me. By you, the media, and the victims themselves. I'm happy tonight, because I've done for you as well. It's my very own 'double event.' "

"If any of this is true, I'll have you picked up in minutes," Knight replied nervously.

"Hadn't you better check, then? Admit it, Inspector, part of you is dying to storm into the toilets. And the moment you do, I'll be gone. Don't think for a moment that I'm going back in there."

"I could arrest you, here and now, for wasting police time."

She laughed. "She's still not out yet, is she?"

Knight fumbled for his ID, then waved it over the bar.

"Same again?" the barmaid asked, catching sight of the leather-bound card. "What's this then?"

"I'm a police officer," he explained. "I'm worried about a young lady who could be in some sort of trouble in the toilets. Could you take a look?"

"On a night like this?" she exclaimed. "You must be joking! We're understaffed as it is. I'm dead meat if the landlord sees me leave the bar. Can't your friend check for you?"

"I already have," said Jenny, obligingly. "There's nothing wrong. She's just tired, that's all." She smiled at Knight as he watched the barmaid move away to serve an agitated customer. "I feel this is one job you have to tackle on your own."

Silently, he rose from the stool and made his way towards the toilet door, ID held aloft like an avenging sword. His heart thumped loudly in his chest, in perfect timing with the beat of the jukebox.

"Police," he announced at the door. "Let me through."

Inside, two young girls screamed as he entered. He pushed past them to the furthermost cubicle door, pounding it with his fists.

"Susan!" he bellowed. "Are you all right, love? I'm a policeman. Please open the door if you can." He bent down, craning his head into the gap between the door and floor. Someone was in there, but he couldn't tell in what state. "Susan, are you all right? Please answer me."

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"What's going on here, then?"

Knight turned to see the fuming face of the landlord. In an instant he flashed his ID. "Police. We're going to have to break this door down. There's a girl in trouble inside. I believe she could be dead."

The voice, when it came, was quiet and scared.

"I'm okay. I'm sorry, I'm not dead. She told me to do it."

Knight heard the lock turn and saw the terrified young face as the door opened. In her hand she held a roll of banknotes. He realised she was far more terrified of him than she must ever have been of Jenny Miles. He'd been played like a sucker and had fallen for the lot of it.

"She didn't tell me you were a copper. She just gave me this money to sit here for a while. Fifty pounds for fifteen minutes; I wasn't going to turn that down. She said she would tell my boyfriend what I was doing. She told me it was all just a joke. I didn't know you were a policeman. I'm really sorry." She started to cry, and the landlord, realising the crisis was over, became anxious to allow his customers use of the facilities again.

"Susan Mulligan," Knight said through gritted teeth, "I should charge you for conspiring to defraud a police officer."

"My name's not Susan, either. It's Wendy. Wendy Blake."

"So who the hell's Susan Mulligan?"

"I'll tell you who Susan Mulligan is," replied the landlord, ushering Knight and the girl towards the door. "She's the one who's been serving you drinks all night. One too many, maybe."

"The barmaid?"

"Laziest barmaid I ever employed. Look, she slipped off the moment I turned my back."

A boisterous crowd awaited their return to the bar. Knight noticed Jenny wasn't among them. His heart beat faster again, the empty stool mocking his every step. One of the mob recognised him as "that useless sod off the telly" setting off a chorus of catcalling and jeering. The landlord appeared behind the bar, and Knight watched as he questioned the remaining staff. The Mulligan girl was missing, her colleagues pointing towards the side door leading to the car park.

"Where's Susan Mulligan?" Knight shouted above the crowd.

"She went outside for a cigarette with your friend when we were in the toilets," replied the landlord, drawing his finger across his throat. "I tell you, that Mulligan girl? She's dead meat now. She really is." ●

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In Mitigation

by Michael Z. Lewin

Your Honor, thank you for bearing with me so patiently as I constructed my case. It is no more than I would expect, given that we are concerned with determining—in the most exact sense of the word—the future, perhaps even the very existence, of the man who sits before you. But it is appreciated none the less. I'm sorry if my series of medical witnesses seemed puzzling. I hope that the reason for my asking them to take the Court's time will shortly become clear.

What is already clear is that my client, Warren Warner, took the lives of those persons he is accused of murdering. All of them. In cold blood. For no apparent reason, though the issue of reason is one to which I shall return. We have never contested these matters of fact. Nor do we contest them now. Warren Warner is a dangerous man. I agree. Warren agrees. That is not in dispute.

But before this all begins to sound too cozy, before you begin to think that I have joined the prosecution team and am angling for a mistrial on *that* basis, let me reassure you. Let me make clear that what should happen to Warren Warner from this time hence *is* in dispute, is *not* agreed. The question of Warren's fate, his "disposition" as the texts have it, is a matter on which we

Michael Z. Lewin loves to experiment with his fiction. Many of his stories are composed almost entirely of dialogue, like the radio plays he writes for the BBC. Others are character studies or family dramas dressed in the plot of a suspense story. He's also mastered the classical forms, particularly the private-eye novel. His new story for us defies classification; it's pure Michael Z. Lewin.

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disagree greatly with the prosecution. In a less charged context I would have said that we disagree violently.

So, we are arguing here about sentencing. Dispersal. The meting of justice. Warren Warner is either twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old, depending on which version of his birth you accept. But he is uncontestably a young man. In normal circumstances he would have a life expectancy in these United States of perhaps another fifty years, more or less. But these are not normal circumstances. It may be that he will be dead in a few months. That is one of the options that Your Honor is deciding.

I don't think that is the right option, you will not be surprised to hear. But, at the same time, I wish to allay one possible fear that Your Honor may have experienced as a result of my allusion to the uncertain circumstances of my client's birth. Testimony about his background formed a small part of the case I have presented to the Court, but only that amount necessary to get an accurate picture of Warren Warner and his place in society. The fear I wish to allay, what I wish to reassure the Court of, is that I do *not* intend to plead for mercy for Warren Warner on the threadbare grounds of social deprivation. I do not intend to argue that Warren Warner is the victim, or even *a* victim in this matter.

My client is a murderer, period. He *could* perfectly well have chosen to continue working as an errand boy for his uncle. He did not. He chose to murder for personal gain instead. My client is not a nice man. He is a dangerous man. But he made his own decisions, as he testified. He knew what he was doing. Society is not the culprit here. Warren Warner is.

But the time, Your Honor, has come for the Court to examine more closely what crimes, exactly, Warren Warner has committed. And the answer, in one sense, is that Warren Warner stands accused and convicted of three counts of murder in the first degree.

But it is the phrase "in the first degree" that I ask the Court to consider now. Murder is not simply murder, either to the law or to real life. Not all murders are the same, either under the rules of jurisprudence or in natural law.

Even setting aside the crime of manslaughter, the law acknowledges and then tries to define two different degrees of murder. This is common throughout the United States. So, a murder is not simply a murder, and a murderer is not pure

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and simple a murderer and nothing else. There are degrees of murder. And there must therefore also be degrees of murderer.

But no, Your Honor, I am not about to argue that Warren Warner is a second-degree, not a first-degree, murderer. He was convicted correctly. That is not my argument. I am looking at the crime of murder.

Now, the law itself acknowledges degree. That is because the wrongful taking of life differs, depending on the particular circumstances of the crime and the criminal and, yes, on the particular circumstances of the victim. The law, in various ways, also acknowledges more differences between murderers than just two. It acknowledges this by allowing, in differing circumstances, one sentence to be passed on one murderer and a different sentence to be passed on another, even though both stand convicted of the same crime. The crime of murder.

What *is* the crime of murder? I wish, in my remaining time, Your Honor, to look more closely at the answer to that question. I am getting to the nub of my argument. Yes, I am near the nub.

Murder is the taking of life. But what is that? It is the depriving, of a victim, of further life. A victim is alive at one moment. Then the murderer does something that causes that victim to be deprived of as much life as he or she would otherwise expect to enjoy. Enjoy, or endure. Yes, endure, Your Honor, because even in this basic sense what seems straightforward is not. Throughout this great land increasing numbers of laws are being passed that allow, for instance, medical staff to take actions to reduce the amount of life that, say, chronically unconscious patients might otherwise experience—I say neither enjoy nor endure, for who knows.

No, I am not going to argue that Warren Warner did his victims a favor by murdering them, Your Honor. I merely make the point that the taking of life in an act of murder is, in essence, the taking of subsequent time to be spent alive. But that even this act is not, in all cases, considered to be murder.

The point is this. Has a person who purposely shoots a healthy year-old child through the heart committed an identical crime to that committed by the person who purposely shoots a healthy 101-year-old through the heart?

I argue, Your Honor, that though both are heinous, vile, moving, and to be despised, I argue that they are *not* identical crimes. No matter which way you look at it, the overwhelming,

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overwhelming, balance of probability is that the year-old child has been deprived of vastly more life than the centurian. It is impossible to argue otherwise. The child has lost more by being murdered. More has been taken when the child's life has been taken. The murder of the child, Your Honor, is the worse crime.

But by arguing thus, I am in no way attempting to encourage the wanton destruction of the mature, and I am not attempting to disparage the contribution to society that is made by the mature. My life, all our lives, are made richer by contact with the old.

But the taking of life is not simply the taking of life. Murder, even first-degree murder, is not simply first-degree murder. Differences exist. Some acts are worse than others. The differentiation may be too complex, the possible different circumstances too various, for all the gradations to be acknowledged in the written statutes, but the fact that there are differences is inescapable.

So, Your Honor, when a learned, wise, and just person like yourself is required to assess the crimes of a murderer, it is impossible, surely, for you to avoid examining each murder on its own merit. Pardon the seemingly unfeeling phrase I am about to use, but you must assess just how bad a crime each murder was. I say this without seeking to condone the acts of my client, or any other murderer, in any way whatever. But the doctor who switches off the life-support technology of a brain-dead child, the bank robber who shoots a child, the father who smothers his dying, pain-wracked child, they all commit the same act in one sense, but law and natural justice differentiate dramatically between the judgment passed on each act, and the dispersal applying to each "perpetrator."

Your Honor, please examine the three murders perpetrated by Warren Warner. My client battered Howard Sorenson to death. A foul crime. But Dr. Mitchell Heycheiser, who conducted the defense autopsy, testified that the fifty-three-year-old victim, though in apparent good health, did in fact have undiagnosed colo-rectal cancer and a life expectancy at the time of his death of twelve months at most. Dr. Heycheiser's expertise and findings were accepted by the prosecution without qualification.

The second victim, Your Honor, Ethel Young, was eighty-six years of age. Her own physician testified as to her stroke history. Dr. Heycheiser's examination of the body also discovered related

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chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and numerous lesser pathological conditions, none contested by the prosecution. Furthermore, the prosecution's own witness testified that the bullet from Warren Warner's gun did *not* follow a trajectory that would, automatically and necessarily, have caused Ethel Young to die. The fact that she did succumb within half an hour of being shot is, itself, the most eloquent testimony to the fact that the victim had a loose grasp on the thread of life before my client even thought of entering her home. Dr. Heycheiser speculated—but remember, his medical eminence and expertise was uncontested—he speculated that Ethel Young would have been unlikely to survive the approaching winter.

That brings us to Samuel Tucker. This victim of Warren Warner's infamy was quite a different case from the other two. Samuel Tucker was twenty-two years old. Doctor Heycheiser's examination found no significant sign of disease. *Bar* those physical conditions that were directly related to Samuel Tucker's opiate addiction. For Samuel Tucker, Your Honor, was no ordinary twenty-two-year-old living an ordinary, wholesome American twenty-two-year-old's life. Warren Warner stabbed Samuel Tucker to death in a dispute over a substantial heroin transaction. For not only was Samuel Tucker a severely addicted drug *user,* he was his neighborhood's main drug *dealer.* You have already heard extensive testimony about Samuel Tucker's neighborhood, Your Honor. You have heard from police witnesses, respected sociologists, and from one of the country's leading experts on drug demographics. Witness after witness, expert after expert, expressed the confident opinion that Samuel Tucker already had an *extremely* short life expectancy before Warren Warner ended all uncertainty that fateful night.

Your Honor, I will not review each detail of the testimony presented by the defense. I have every confidence that the Court took fair and complete notes as it was presented. But my submission, Your Honor, is that my client, Warren Warner, vile though he may be, did not remotely, *not remotely,* commit any murder that was at all close to the worst end of the scale of possible first-degree murders. My expert witnesses—not one challenged by the prosecution—assessed the total time taken by my client's three murders as two or three, at the most four years. Four years of life, between three victims. These people, Your Honor, with all due commiserations with their relatives, these people

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were *all* already on their way out, to use the common parlance. Four years of shortened life at most. Quite possibly less.

Now you must make a judgment about the future life of Warren Warner. I believe that the case against the death penalty is undeniable. If you sentence Warren Warner to death for these murders, what is left for you when you come to sentence the strangler of a child, the machine-gun murderer of a class of college students? You can't execute such a murderer fifty times over, though such crimes are inescapably worse murders than those committed by my client. The prosecution's demand for the death penalty is absurd.

It is, of course, for you to review the sentencing patterns of this court for past first-degree murders, and I am sure you will do so justly. The only further thing that I can do now is to assure the Court that my client would respond positively to any program Your Honor might consider for drug and social rehabilitation. I also wish to apply for bail, pending an appeal. The defense rests, Your Honor. ●

Solution To The Mystery Crossword

I	S	I	S	■	S	H	O	E	■	C	A	R	L	S
A	P	S	E	■	T	E	A	L	■	A	V	A	I	L
G	I	L	L	■	A	R	T	E	■	R	E	P	L	Y
O	N	E	F	O	R	T	H	E	M	O	N	E	Y	■
■	■	■	■	R	E	S	■	■	A	L	G	■	■	■
N	O	G	O	O	D	■	E	R	R	■	E	D	O	M
O	C	E	A	N	■	E	R	I	C	■	■	A	C	E
T	H	E	F	O	U	R	O	F	H	E	A	R	T	S
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■	T	H	R	E	E	W	I	T	N	E	S	S	E	S
A	R	E	T	E	■	A	R	O	D	■	E	A	R	N
B	E	A	R	D	■	R	A	R	E	■	A	N	N	A
C	E	R	E	S	■	D	E	E	R	■	S	E	E	P

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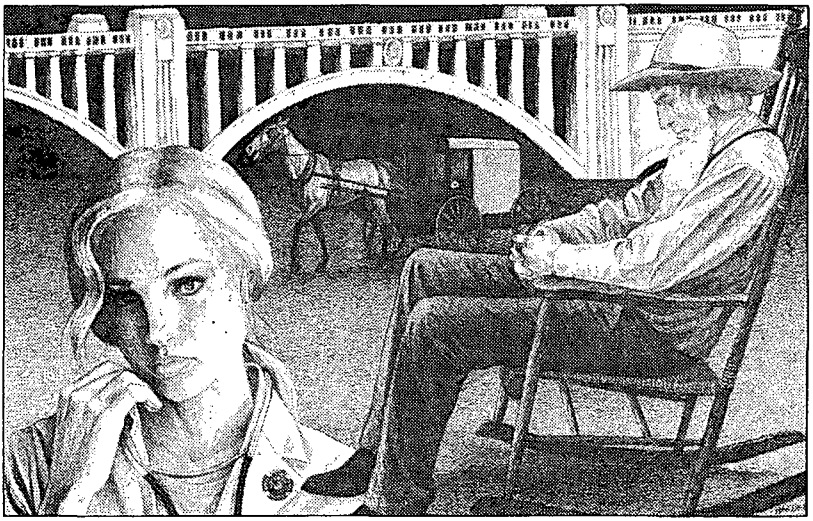

Art by Laurie Harden

A PLAIN AND HONEST DEATH

by Bill Pomidor

"You were once a police investigator, *ja?*"

It was a loaded question. Like many Amish, Abe Yoder has mastered the art of silence. So when he finally gets around to saying anything, it usually has about five possible meanings.

Like the first time Abe showed up on my front porch, the day after Jessica and I moved into the farmhouse next door to his. He brought along two loaves of freshly baked bread, a jar of strawberry preserves, and a crock of real butter as welcoming gifts for the Yankee strangers. He sat beside the fireplace in glacial dignity, his bearing as stiff as his coarse-cut blue suit, broadfall trousers, and plain white shirt. His reserve froze my

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stream of small talk and even chilled little Jessica's bubbly enthusiasm. But finally, toward the end of the visit, he thawed enough to open the suit coat, reach inside, and pull out the most beautiful hand-carved chess set I had ever seen. Walnut and maple armies, an oak and cherry playing field, an ash frame inlaid with some of the classic Amish scrollwork—Fraktur, Distelfinks, herzen.

He set the board on our coffee table, aligned the pieces with loving care, and asked, "You *verstehen* the game of chess?"

In the six months since then, it became a regular thing. Every Saturday evening, Abe brought the marvelous chessboard and enough hearth-baked bread to last us through the week. He always showed up just before I put Jessica to bed, gave her a somber goodnight pat, and lately even the smallest of hugs. The games were full of silence: the melancholy wind in the fields, the heavy-settling creaks of the old farmhouse, the sprightly tick-ticking of the anniversary clock on the mantel. Whether he won or lost, Abe slowly rose to his feet, gave that funny little bow and the tiniest of smiles, and shook my hand before leaving. If the game wasn't finished by ten o'clock, Abe carefully marked the positions on a piece of paper for the next time.

But that night, when he asked me about my work on the force, he was even more somber than usual.

I wasn't surprised that Abe knew I'd worked for the Cleveland police. His people carefully isolate themselves from the world—shunning television and radio and electricity and automobiles—but they aren't ignorant of it. Information is soaked up through observation and conversation and inference, fun-

In September of this year, E. P. Dutton will release the first novel in a medical mystery series by Ohio physician William J. Pomidor. The book features married doctors Cal and Plato Marley and should be of particular interest to readers of "A Plain and Honest Death," since one of the book's characters makes an appearance in the story. "A Plain and Honest Death" was one of seven finalists in MWA's 50th Anniversary Short Story Contest. ✝

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neled from household to household with no telephones required. I'd little doubt that Abe Yoder had already known most of my life history before he ever set foot on my front porch last December.

But I was surprised he'd bothered to ask me about it.

"Yes," I finally answered. We were playing on the porch, watching the lazy May sun set the sky on fire. Off in the distance, Abe's son Levi was driving a tedder and a team of Percherons up and down the acres of spring alfalfa. "I'm a private detective now. But before that, I was a cop. A homicide detective."

"You were not good at detecting?"

He said it matter-of-factly; a plain-spoken inference, no offense implied. Abe ran the finest woodworking shop in Geauga County, but his only son was a farmer. Levi was not good at woodworking. His hands were made for holding pitchforks instead of chisels.

"With Rachel gone, I needed a more flexible job so I could take care of Jessica. At least until she's old enough for school."

"Ah." Abe nodded slowly, gave a wistful smile. I knew he had a daughter, too. One who had left the Order to live with the Yankees, attend college in Cleveland. Abe spoke often and with poorly hidden pride of his wife, his son, his grandchildren. But I didn't even know his daughter's name.

He moved his rook to check my king. I parried the advance, but lost my queen in the process. He kept me on the run for another half-hour, steadily eroding my defenses and finally cornering me between his two bishops and the rook.

But instead of standing and shaking my hand like always, he sat and stared at the pieces for a long moment. He reached out a stubby callused finger and toppled my king. He lowered his head into his hands and dropped his elbows onto his knees. His shoulders shook.

"Abe? Is something wrong?"

I waited a long moment, listening to the hiss of Abe's Coleman lamp standing on the porch rail, the mournful hoot of a barn owl in the distance, suddenly conscious of the cultural wall between us, wondering what I could say to break the silence. Slowly his head lifted, face gaunt in the harsh glare of the lamp, tears glistening in the wispy gray beard. His eyes, of that pale unsettling Wedgwood blue so common among the Amish, focused on a spot about a hundred yards behind me. When he spoke, his voice was harsh as lye.

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"My daughter, Leah. She was murdered last week."

The *Plain Dealer* was calling it suicide, and they were probably right. Several witnesses had phoned 911 last Saturday night to report a jumper perched on the rails of the old Lorain-Carnegie Transportation Bridge, a dozen stories above the Cuyahoga River. By the time the police arrived, the bridge was empty. But then early Sunday morning, a freighter hand spied Leah Yoder's broken body downstream in the Flats, hung up on a piling beneath Shooter's Nightclub.

The routine drug screens were all negative. No suicide note, but that didn't mean much. The only glitch was an insistent, indignant father who refused to believe his only daughter would consign her soul to an everlasting hell.

It wouldn't have made the papers at all if Abe's daughter were an ordinary college student. But she wasn't. Leah Yoder was slated to graduate at the top of her medical-school class this month.

The editorial page had a field day with focus articles on the wages of success, the pressures of medical school, the "secret pain" of the medical profession. It happens every couple of years—some medical student or intern or resident falls asleep at the wheel after a night on call or just plain kills himself, and the powers that be shake their heads sadly and talk about changing the system. But they never do. If they had, maybe Rachel wouldn't have wrapped her car around that tree after a bad call-night during her senior year of residency.

She'd languished in intensive care for a week, passing in and out of a coma and finally starting to recover just before a damaged artery at the base of her brain popped and spilled our dreams away.

I hadn't set foot inside a hospital in the year since then, and I hoped I wouldn't have to now. I'd find out at lunch, when I talked over the case with Max Albrecht, chief of the homicide division. He didn't owe me any favors; no cases of whiskey had traded hands, no huge poker debts would be erased. But he'd been my partner and mentor on the force before he finally made it to chief. And he was Jessica's godfather.

Like always, he insisted that I bring her along. By the time the tooth fairy makes her first visit, Jessica will know more about the private-eye trade than Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade

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put together. Pity the steady boyfriend who dates someone else behind her back.

The Great Lakes Brewing Company squats in the relics of an old grain warehouse across from the West Side Market, just up the street from Riverside General. The beer is brewed on the premises, of course; Max wouldn't have it any other way. He was waiting there, looking splendidly ridiculous perched atop one of the narrow stools, enormous belly resting on the oldest bar in Cleveland. The place had been a favorite hangout of Elliot Ness back in the thirties when he was Cleveland's Safety Director.

Max was a hard-nosed homicide detective, but he had a few romantic foibles. One of them was believing the story that the two chunks of lead embedded in the mahogany bar had been fired at Elliot Ness. The more credible version dated them back to the seventies, when the bar had been a popular bikers' hangout.

His other foible was Jessica. Max's plastic jowls melted into a grin when he spotted us. He slid from his chair and waddled over, swallowed her into an embrace like an amoeba enveloping its lunch. "Jessica, baby, how's my little darling? Kisses? Kisses?"

He squeezed her closer, sowed a row of kisses in her sandy curls, planted a wet one on her cheek. She swiped it away with her sleeve and made a couple of wheezy gasps.

"She needs to breathe once in a while, Max."

"Oh—sorry." He set her free, cupped her fingers in his massive paw, and led us toward the dining area. "Come on, sweetie. Uncle Max has a quiet little table in back, just for us."

"And how are you, Chief?" I slipped Jessica into the highchair, waved a hand in front of his face. "Max?"

"Huh?" He tore his gaze away from Jessica and wrinkled his forehead at me in that way he has, as though he's convinced you're a mirage—as though, if he could just squint hard enough, you'd disappear or turn into a cactus or something. It's a great interrogation tool; some of the dumber perps brag about their crimes just to get his attention. "Oh—hi, Rafe."

He turned back to Jessica. "I've got a little present for you, honeybug."

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From beneath his chair, he dragged out a plastic department-store bag and reverently placed it on her tray. She reached a chubby hand inside and pulled out a stuffed purple and green flesh-eating dinosaur.

"Bannie! Bannie!"

Max beamed at me. "She's gorgeous, Rafe."

"Wafe? Wafe?"

"Papa, dear. Call me Papa, okay?"

"She looks just like Rachel."

"Wachel." She hugged the dinosaur, opened its mouth and stuck her nose inside. "Wachel."

The waiter arrived with beer and milk and took our order.

Max finally tore his attention away from Jessica long enough to slurp foam from his Burning River Ale and glance over at me. "So who wants to know about Leah Yoder?"

"Abe Yoder. Her father."

He sighed. "Someone else who can't believe she killed herself, huh?"

"He's not the only one?"

"Hardly anyone could believe it, but there it is." He sipped more beer. "Bright kid, top of her class. Landed a spot in an ophthalmology residency—I hear that's hard to do. Had everything to live for. Between you and me, if there hadn't been witnesses, if there'd been *anything* that didn't fit, we'd have given it a closer look."

"Wook? Wook?"

"That's right, honey. A closer look." He smiled at her. "She's talking a lot now, isn't she?"

"I think the language circuits are finally hooking up—she's learned about a hundred words this week."

"Cookie?"

"The most important ones first, of course."

I handed Jessica a tortilla chip. She lapped at the salt and smacked her lips. "Yummm."

The food arrived: Brewmaster's Pie for Max, crab cakes for me, and a hot dog for Jessica. I took it out of the bun, poured a puddle of ketchup, and planted the dog in her tiny fist.

"Even though it was ruled a suicide, we gave it a once-over." Max shrugged. "Medical school valedictorians deserve a little more attention, I guess."

"The *Plain Dealer* thought so."

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"Did you catch how they kept saying *'alleged* suicide'?" He made a wry face. "Anyway, here's a list of names. We talked to the roommate, the boyfriend, a couple of her classmates. No hint of problems, but you never know. I copied the police and autopsy reports too."

"Great." I wolfed another crab cake, wiped some ketchup from Jessica's chin.

"You'll probably want to start with the roommate. The boyfriend isn't much help—he's a total wreck." He drained the last of his beer. "So how'd you get involved?"

"Abe's my next-door neighbor. We've gotten to be pretty good friends. I told him I'd look into it for him, ask around a little."

"The family never wants to believe it's suicide."

"Neither does the newspaper. What do you think?"

"I don't know, Rafe." He sighed and rubbed his head, patted his gleaming bald spot in the field of stubbly gray as if to make sure it was still there. "Maybe I just don't want to believe a young, pretty, smart thing like her would do herself in. How could someone be that successful and still be unhappy? It upsets our view of the world." Max shrugged. "So we got newspaper editorials, and questioning families, and my vague gut feeling that something isn't quite right." He burped softly. "End of lecture."

"Murder? It's happened before. A little push from behind—"

"No way. The 911 callers said she was up there alone. The setup was too perfect for suicide." His eyes weren't convinced, though.

"But . . ."

"But it's almost *too* perfect." He closed his eyes, drew a huge sigh from deep down in that enormous belly. "Just a crazy hunch. That and two bits won't even buy a cup of coffee, these days."

But in eight years of working with Max Albrecht, I'd learned to trust his crazy hunches, even more than he did. They were usually right.

Willowood Village was a drab little sixplex squashed between two dead warehouses, a couple of blocks up from Riverside General. A pretentious name: The apartment straddled the line between the Flats and the atom-bombed neighborhoods of Cleveland's near west side, where willows were almost as scarce as cops.

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Sondra Graber buzzed me in without waiting for an answer. Their apartment was a half flight down from the street. She rushed into the hall, but the smile trickled away from her face.

"I'm sorry—I thought you were someone else." Her voice was a husky soprano. She spun on her heel and darted back toward her open door.

"Miss Graber?" I squinted through the gloom. She was almost as tall as me, with fluffy blond hair, overstuffed cheeks, and too many teeth. Like a cross between a Barbie doll and a hamster. She glanced back at me with a curious little twitch of her nose. "My name is Rafe McCutcheon. I'm a friend of Leah's father. Can I talk with you a minute?"

She cocked her head and leaned on the doorframe, nervously tapping her heel as I explained why I was there. Finally, she gave another little twitch and gestured me inside.

"I've just about *had* it with the reporters and the police, you know. I probably shouldn't be talking to you, either, but—" She led me down a short hall and left me in the living room, then darted off to make a phone call.

It wasn't typical student housing. The three-piece sofa faced a television set big enough for Jessica to play house in. Brass and crystal lamps, cherry end tables and curio cabinets, and a nice little collection of Matisse prints in gold-leafed frames.

"Sorry—didn't mean to be rude." Standing in the kitchen doorway, Sondra drew a deep breath. Her nose had stopped twitching. "I was expecting somebody, but he hadn't even left yet. Can I get you anything?"

"No, thanks."

She sat in the wing chair across from me, primping her golden hair. If the somebody wasn't a date, she was a little overdressed for a Sunday evening at home: puff-sleeved taffeta dress with matching jade earrings, dark stockings, and a pair of low-heeled dancing shoes. The bracelets on her wrists jangled like cat's bells with every twitch. "Leah's father sent you?"

"Yeah." I explained that I was a private eye, trying to fill in some details for Abe. "He has trouble believing it was suicide."

She shook her head sadly. "So do a lot of people."

"How about you?"

"I don't know." Sondra stared off at one of the windows. It faced the crumbling brick wall of the warehouse next door, so she'd covered it with a hundred-dollar Tiffany. "Something was

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bothering Leah. She comes—*came*—across as this all-American type, but she was very insecure. Lately she'd been acting pretty depressed."

It's the language of our time: insecurity, depression, stress, Yuppie Flu. We're all psychiatrists now—it's more fun than talking about the weather.

"Hardly anyone knew she was Amish," she continued. "Not even me, until we started rooming together. She repressed it. I think it was eating away at her, you know?"

"So you think she was suicidal?" I asked.

"I'm a pharmacist, not a psychiatrist." She frowned, then gave her diagnosis. "But Leah did seem pretty depressed. Lately I'd come home and hear her crying in her room."

"Boyfriend troubles?"

"Huh?" Her eyes flicked over to the end table beside her. Framed photos—a man I guessed to be her father in a patrolman's uniform; the face looked vaguely familiar. An old family portrait: Sondra, her father and mother, a sister. The two girls might have been twins. "Oh—I don't know. You'd have to ask Eric about that."

"How was she Saturday night?"

"Kind of withdrawn." Sondra gnawed her lip. "I thought she was just tired—she'd been on call in the ICU at Riverside since Friday morning, and she didn't finish until Saturday evening." She gave a wide-eyed shrug. "I don't know why *anyone* would work that hard."

"You drove her home?"

"Yeah. I'm getting my pharmacy degree, working part-time at Riverside until I get my license." She grimaced. "Leah didn't have a car—she didn't even *drive,* if you can believe it. Her boyfriend usually took her home, but he was on call, couldn't get away. I was just getting off shift, so I said okay, I'd take her."

I glanced around admiringly. "You've got a nice apartment here."

"It doesn't look like much from the outside." She grinned, hamster cheeks puffing up with pride. "Most of the stuff is mine—they haven't picked up Leah's things yet."

"Could I see her room?"

"Sure." She led me down a short corridor, opened a door, and switched on a light. "It's mostly just books and stuff. She didn't have a lot of things."

But I recognized Abe's handiwork here—bright pine and pale

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oak in the bedframe, desk, and chair. A bare hardwood floor, a framed print of Breton's "Morning Star," an oak rocker, an oil lamp. I walked over to the lamp and fiddled with the knob.

"She used that a lot for reading, don't ask me why." Sondra shook her head at the monumental idiocy of it. "I told her it would spoil her eyes."

Sondra was getting on my nerves. I glanced past her shoulder at the racks and racks of books. Besides the medical texts, I spied well-worn copies of *Martyrs Mirror, The Schleitheim Confession*, and an ancient German Bible.

"Funny thing," Sondra chirped. "Leah always had her nose in that Bible—practically every night. But she really wasn't preachy or offensive." Her voice was wistful.

I summoned up some sympathy. "It must be pretty tough, losing a friend that way."

"Yeah." She sounded a little surprised. "I'm really going to miss her."

Cal Marley was an old friend of my wife's from Northwestern Medical School. Cal had gone on to study forensic pathology in Chicago while Rachel came here to Riverside's general surgery program. When Cal ended up a deputy coroner here in Cleveland, we all got together several times. I'd worked with her on a few homicide cases—she was tough and competent. And she had a good shoulder for crying on.

"Rafe—good to hear from you." The morgue's operator had connected me with the autopsy suite. A buzz saw whined in the background. "How's Jessica?"

"Not bad." She was in the highchair, watching the purple dinosaur dance on TV while I stuffed her full of the hated oatmeal. "She's been my constant companion lately."

"Every private eye needs a good partner."

"Right." I shoveled another spoonful in. "We're working on a case right now. I was hoping to pry a little information out of you."

"No problem." The saw finally quit. "Hang on a second, Rafe." Cal set the phone down, but I could still hear her voice. "Weigh that first, then get me some thin slices of the frontal lobes." She picked up the receiver again. "Sorry about that. Who do you want to know about?"

"Leah Yoder—Siegel's valedictorian. It was ruled a suicide."

"Oh, yeah." Cal's voice dropped. "I saw something about that in the paper."

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"I was wondering—are you folks absolutely sure it was suicide?"

"We're never absolutely sure about anything, Rafe. You know that."

On the television, the purple dinosaur was waving goodbye. Jessica waved back sadly, mouth shut tight as a bank vault. She twisted away from the spoon, reached her arms toward me. "Huck? Huck?"

I gave her a hug, then shoveled another spoonful inside. "But is there any chance it was murder? Like maybe she was drugged or knocked on the head, then tossed off the bridge?"

"I'd have to look at the report, but it's pretty unlikely. If there were any signs of head trauma that didn't fit, they'd have noticed. Besides, wasn't she seen up there, alone?"

"*Someone* was seen up there alone."

"Yeah. I guess it didn't have to be her. We can't fix the time of death *that* closely."

"What about drugs? Maybe something that wouldn't show up on your standard screen?"

"Huck?" The mouth was shut tight, little arms reaching for me again.

"No huck. Eat." I got a last spoonful in and called it a day.

"That's a little harder." Cal sighed. "We could run a mass spec to look for something unusual. . . . Are you suspicious about anything in particular, Rafe?"

"Nothing I can put a finger on. But her father's a friend of mine—I'm looking into it for him."

"Tell you what. I'll check it out, and if it seems worthwhile, we'll run a mass spec on another sample to see if anything pops up. Would that satisfy you?"

"You're a sweetheart, Cal. Anyone ever tell you that?"

"My husband, once in a while. Hey, how about bringing Jessica over for dinner this Sunday?"

"Great." I slipped Jessica out of the highchair. She bounded into the family room like an escaping prisoner. "As long as you don't serve oatmeal."

I had a long day ahead, so I dropped Jessica at Happy Valley Day Care on my way downtown. The Viral Library, as I call it. All spring long, Jessica had checked out a new illness every week, brought it home for us to share, then taken it back and exchanged it for another. It would start all over again in the fall.

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I crossed the Lorain-Carnegie Transportation Bridge on my way to Riverside General. It's a grand and gaudy thing, a product of early-thirties art-deco glitz, supported by four stone goddesses of transportation holding trucks, a car, a stagecoach, even a hayrack. I wondered what Abe Yoder would think of it.

Looking downriver from the bridge, you can see all the glittering symbols of Cleveland's renaissance: the Gateway Complex, the BP Oil and Society Bank buildings, the flameless Cuyahoga River. But you can't see the country from up there, the rolling green hills and valleys of the plain people. You can't even see the first ring of suburbs. Crossing the bridge in the misty drizzle, I felt the old familiar desolation taking hold, like arthritis on a rainy day. And suddenly, it wasn't quite so hard to picture Leah Yoder up there, losing track of her hope and her past.

I tried to shake the feeling as I entered the lobby at Riverside General. I'd been there a lot when Rachel was a resident, so I knew how to get around. The bigger hospitals employ thousands of people and have hundreds of visitors every day—from families and friends to drug salesmen, students, lecture attendees, and clergy. Security can't possibly keep track of them all. So if you want to get somewhere without a lot of red tape, just plaster a busy, self-important expression on your face, and never ever look like you're lost. You'll get there eventually.

It wasn't hard to find the Intensive Care Unit; they hadn't moved it since Rachel was a patient there. The tough part was dragging myself down that last stretch of corridor, hearing the beeps and sighs of the monitors and ventilators, smelling the iodine and soap and urine and death.

When I finally reached the unit, my legs locked up. I froze outside the door, coldly sweating, like a bull at the gate of the slaughter pen.

"Sir? Are you all right?"

A soft voice behind me, a hand on my shoulder. I turned, flashed the woman a ghastly smile, and nodded. "Just—just fine."

"Can I help you?" Her face slowly swam into focus. Plump, with milk-chocolate skin, dark eyes, a pretty face. She wore a concerned frown, and the long white coat of a resident physician.

I straightened up and found my voice. "I'm a friend of Leah Yoder's father. I'm looking for the senior resident on service this month."

"Oh." Her frown deepened. She patted my shoulder again. "That's me—Elizabeth Morrisey." She led me inside to one of

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the conference rooms. "But I've already given a statement to the police. I don't think there's much more I can say."

Over Styrofoam cups of stale coffee, I told her about Abe's suspicions. She agreed that Leah's death was a shock. "She *had* been under a lot of stress this month, though. We all are. It's kind of crazy here."

"I know." The door was open. Through it, I could just make out Rachel's glass cubicle. If I closed my eyes, thought hard enough, I could make the year disappear, place myself at her bedside, feel her hand in mine, kiss the cool forehead, and try to ignore the respirator breathing life into her. And pretend she was just sleeping, just sleeping.

"—so I've only got a few minutes," Elizabeth was saying.

"I'm sorry." I snapped back to the present, collecting my scattered thoughts as the ghosts faded away. "I just wondered if anything unusual happened that night, anything that might explain why Leah did what she did. Was she upset about one of her patients? Did she have a fight with someone?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I was on call with her Friday night. The unit was full, and they kept us jumping—checking O-2 sat's, adjusting the ventilators, putting in a pair of central lines and a Swan-Ganz catheter. I got about five minutes' sleep in a chair at the nurses' station, and Leah fell asleep on her feet during rounds Saturday morning."

"Anything out of the ordinary happen?" Friday's call night sounded pretty typical, judging from Rachel's days as a surgical resident.

"Well—Mr. Blaine over in stepdown was delirious. He tried to leave AMA—against medical advice—but Leah talked him out of it, and we finally sedated him." She smiled sadly. "Leah was always a big help. Always so calm and cool, but good at thinking on her feet. You'd never have known she was just a medical student."

"How was she Saturday evening, when she finally left?"

"Tired." The senior resident closed her eyes and sighed. "But kind of happy, you know? We'd had a pretty good week. We hadn't lost any patients for several days." She shrugged, downed the last of her coffee. "Small victories."

"Big enough."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be more help." Outside, a flutter of activity announced the opening benediction of morning rounds. She stood and handed me a card with her telephone and pager numbers. "If you have any more questions, just give me a call."

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"Thanks." I watched her go, and sat there for a while with the coffee and the memories and the ghosts, wondering when I had decided Leah's death was a suicide after all.

That night, I put Jessica to bed, lit a fire to ward off the chill, and climbed inside a bottle of MacAllan's. The Yankees who built our house added a huge cathedral family room only a couple of years ago, just before we bought it. West-facing windows stretch up the wall on the far side, framing the hearth and chimney brick in the pale gold and purple and aquamarine of the setting sun. The colors blended well with the bright sherry glow of the single malt whiskey.

I needed it tonight. The interview with Eric Brunell had gone worse than I expected. I hadn't known Leah's boyfriend was the chief medical resident at Riverside, but I wasn't surprised. I'd caught him in his office just before lunch.

He had the physique, golden hair, and finely chiseled features of a Norse god, and the sorry, tired eyes of a whipped cur. When I mentioned Leah's name, he dragged me inside like an old friend, closed the door, and hurled himself into a swivel desk chair.

"Sorry about the mess. I haven't had a very good week." His brittle smile quivered and cracked. "You knew Leah?"

"I'm a friend of her father's."

I took a seat on the scruffy little couch. The room might once have been a broom closet, before someone decided it was too small. The walls were covered with a dozen write-on, wipe-off calendars, each plastered with illegible scrawls—names, dates, times—in eight different colors. Call schedules, monthly rotation rosters, lectures, conferences—the entire business of staffing a hospital with residents, interns, and medical students. As chief resident, Eric Brunell had stayed at Riverside an extra year, earning half of what he would once he went into practice. I wondered why.

"What did you say your name was?" Eric asked the floor.

"Rafe McCutcheon. I'm a private investigator. Leah's father asked me to look into her death a little more closely than the police did."

His head snapped up. "Why?"

"He doesn't believe she killed herself."

"She didn't." It was a flat declaration.

"You sound pretty sure." I leaned forward, waiting for some hint, some revelation.

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But he just shook his head, eyes glistening. His voice wavered. "She wouldn't have done that to me. To us."

I sat back again, disappointed. "When was the last time you saw Leah?"

"At lunch Saturday—here at the hospital." His blond brows knotted together. "She was really upbeat, really happy. She'd just talked this psychotic guy out of signing out AMA the night before."

"You didn't see her after that?"

"She paged me to take her home, but I was stuck running a code up on the Geriatrics floor." He turned away, propped his chin on his hands, and glared at the photos on the corkboard over his desk. One near the middle featured him with a pretty blond in camping gear and packs, standing proudly on a mountain ledge.

"Is that you and Leah?" The face resembled the newspaper photos.

"Huh?" He blinked. "No—that's Deanna. Sondra's sister. We dated each other for a while, before I met Leah. Here she is."

He pointed to a photo from this year's Graduation Ball, held just a couple of weeks ago. Leah wasn't looking very plain that night—black satin and lace evening gown, long blond hair pulled up in a rhinestone tiara, high heels and dark stockings, and a smile almost as bright as Eric's. She could have been sisters with Sondra and Deanna.

"We were going to get married this fall." He rubbed a long and delicate hand across his face. His voice rasped. "I was staying on as chief until she graduated. I'm joining a practice in Pittsburgh next month—that's where Leah landed a residency spot."

"How did her family feel about her, about your plans?"

He turned slowly away from the photo. "They were pretty cold, especially to me. There was some talk about shunning, and that scared her a little. But her father stuck with her, said he was happy she was a doctor. He couldn't admit it to their people, but he told Leah. That was all that mattered to her."

He turned back, stared at the photo again, and covered his eyes. "What am I going to *do?*"

Dr. Brunell seemed about ripe for a nervous breakdown. I wondered how he was functioning with his patients, out on the floors. I wondered what kind of mistakes he might make. "How about taking some time off?"

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"I can't." His shoulders slumped even lower. "I have too much to do around here. It's impossible to get away."

I left him there with his schedules and his charts and his world-won't-turn-without-me syndrome, a common diagnosis among doctors. I had it for a while once, on the homicide squad. Rachel had it.

There at home, in the soft glimmer of cooling embers and fading twilight, I drank a final toast to her, and to Leah, and to Eric Brunell, and drifted off to sleep. A fitful slumber full of mechanical beeps and sighs, swaying bridges, floating bodies, and laughing hamsters.

I jerked awake, damp with sweat and despair. Eric Brunell's question rang through my head again, echoing my own thoughts a year ago and now: *"What am I going to do?"* I remembered those first nights alone, waking in the darkness in an empty bed, toying with the service revolver and thinking the unthinkable. Thinking it again now.

And finally hearing a voice in the night. A small frightened cry, calling my name, pulling me back from the edge. A guardian angel named Jessica who gets night terrors just like me, who reaches up for me as I pluck her from the crib, who brushes my tears away with her fine sandy hair, nestles in beside my neck, and drifts off to sleep in the ignorant security of childhood, in the soft orange glow of a Disney nightlight.

As I crossed the Lorain-Carnegie bridge again the next afternoon, my spirits were a little higher. I'd spent the morning catching up on office work and returning phone calls, one of which was from Cal Marley. In an excited voice, she had told me that the mass spectrometer picked up a foreign substance in Leah Yoder's bloodstream—a synthetic narcotic that wasn't detected by the usual battery of tests. Just as I hung up, Max called to say he'd heard the news and had a suspect lined up. Everson Blaine, the delirious patient who tried to leave the hospital the night before Leah's death, who also happened to be a very prosperous and paranoid drug wholesaler. The week before, he'd been arrested on five felony drug counts and released on bail. He'd gone on a drinking binge to celebrate, and promptly landed in the hospital with a bout of acute pancreatitis. Max wondered if one of Blaine's business partners might have taken care of Leah to make sure no secrets had been spilled.

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I was flattered that Max had invited me along for his chat with Blaine. But it sounded pretty thin to me. I told him so on our way to Blaine's room.

"You think he might have admitted something to Leah?" I asked. "Something that would ruin his defense? It wouldn't matter if he did. If Blaine was delirious, he could have admitted killing Jimmy Hoffa, and no judge would accept it as evidence."

"It wouldn't have to be *courtroom* evidence," Max argued. "What if he was afraid he'd blathered something important—like how he's bringing the stuff into town? We're pretty sure he's using freighters; all we'd need is a name."

"You're reaching, Max. He probably won't even remember who Leah was."

But I was wrong. Everson Blaine's face lit up when we mentioned Leah Yoder. Blaine had probably been handsome once, but alcoholism had given him the look of a concentration camp victim. His yellow eyes were sunken, his limbs were like sticks jabbed into his swollen pumpkin belly, and his grin looked more like a death grimace. He seemed more like sixty than forty.

"Sure I remember her," he told us, grinning again. "I was real tight with a sweet piece named Yoder awhile back. So I kept teasing this doctor gal—called her my hoochie and shit like that, but she was all right, she took it fine. Kept telling me to lie still, quit twisting, but I couldn't help it. Felt like my guts were spilling out. You ever have pancreatitis?"

"No," Max replied bluntly. "Friday night, did you—"

"All I got to do is *smell* bourbon and my guts start aching." He twisted in bed and winced. "That girl explained it all to me, how I got to stay away from the booze. She's right, man. From now on I'm sticking with reef, a little hash, some rock now and then. No more hard stuff."

"You two talked quite a bit on Friday night?" I asked.

"She was my doc—saw me down in emergency and stuck with me the whole night." He sighed happily. "My own pretty blond angel, keeping the bugs away."

"Bugs?" Max's eyes swept the room.

"Big green furry things with about five hundred legs apiece, all over my bed." His eyes bulged at the memory. "That's why I tried to leave. But that Yoder piece calmed me down, gave me a shot that made the bugs go away. She was one hell of a doctor. Didn't make no difference what color I was, or if I done a little

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street trade. Too bad she had to go and kill herself."

"She didn't. She was murdered."

He squinted at us. "You shinin' me, Inspector. Who the hell would want to do a crazy thing like that?"

"That's what we're trying to find out."

With all the sedatives and pain medications, it took awhile to sink in. Finally he chuckled, a throaty, wheezy gargle. "You trying to pin it on *me?* Right—I just got up and dragged my little IV pole over to the bridge and tossed that pretty Amish girl off."

"Maybe one of your friends did you a favor," Max suggested. "She was drugged first."

"So it must've been us, huh?" He chuckled again, a sound like a death rattle. "Listen, you got drugs floating into this city from all over the place. Every interstate and pier. Even the amateurs are getting in on it—pushing cheap hospital shit and cutting everyone's profit margins. But do I kill anybody for it? No way. That ain't Everson Blaine's style. Besides, this Yoder piece was thick, real straight. I didn't have nothing against her."

Outside the room, Max shrugged. His blue polyester suit looked tired today. "Another day, another suspect."

"You tagged anyone else for it?"

"Not so far. Everyone's clean." He grinned. "Oh—except her roommate has a mile-high stack of unpaid parking tickets."

"Maybe Leah threatened to turn her in."

He chuckled, then paused, suddenly thoughtful. "Funny thing about Blaine."

"What's that?"

"Leah Yoder kept it a secret she was Amish, right? Then how come Blaine knew about it?"

"Good question." I thought back to the interview. "Maybe he just asked her. Maybe he knows Yoder's a common Amish name."

"Maybe," he grunted reluctantly.

"He's pretty shrewd, isn't he? All that punk talk is just an act."

Max grinned at me. "He's got an M.B.A. From Case Western, I think."

I whistled. "Imagine the money he saves, doing his own taxes."

"A real business tycoon. Profit margins and all that."

"What was that line about cheap hospital drugs?" I asked.

"Oh, that." We were crossing the lobby; Max lowered his voice and stepped closer. "It's real hush-hush, but Riverside's come up

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short on narcotics lately. We're trying to pin it down. Someone's phonying up the floor records, having drugs sent up for patients who aren't there. Our best guess is it's one of the doctors."

After that, it was pretty easy. I checked the hospital floor plan, went over the traffic records with hospital security. And got lucky after just a couple of evenings out with the long lens and a night scope.

If you ever get a parking ticket, pay it. They can get you in all kinds of trouble.

Once again I pressed the Graber buzzer at Willowood, and once again Sondra buzzed me in without waiting for an answer. Again she popped into the hallway, saw me, and frowned with disappointment. I have that effect on women sometimes.

"I'm sorry, but I'm about to go out." Sondra darted back into her nest, but I slipped through the door behind her.

"Hey!" The cop's daughter was decked out tonight: sheath dress, rhinestones, three or four yards of gold necklace. With the heels, she was taller than me.

"You'd better cancel your date," I told her. "We're going to have a little chat, and it may take awhile."

"You're *crazy*." She took a couple of steps back. "I'm calling the police."

"No need to. They're on their way."

She blinked at me with those black rodent eyes, hard as marbles. The little nose started a twitching frenzy. The shoulders slumped. Her pushy bravado had disappeared, leaving only the frailest shell, like one of those pretty Ukrainian Easter eggs. One poke and she'd crumble.

"You're lying." She didn't put much feeling into it.

"Come on, dear." I took her hand, led her to the sofa. "We can talk until your boyfriend shows up—the law student at State—and opens up the trunk of your new Jag right in front of the police."

She was frowning, tongue trapped between all those teeth, eyes staring at nothing and everything, hand tapping a nervous cadence on her knee. She gave me a shy little smile. "How much do you want?"

"Sorry." I smiled regretfully. "That won't work for me any better than it did for Leah. But you tried, didn't you?"

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Sondra sat for a long moment, giving my left breast pocket a dull-eyed stare. Finally, she spoke. "You're right. Leah didn't want any money, said she didn't care about it." Her voice was hollow with disbelief. "I begged, *pleaded* with her, but she wouldn't listen. It was her fault. She just wouldn't listen."

"She surprised you that night, didn't she?" Sondra's parking tickets came from leaving her car near the pharmacy door. When shipments came in, she'd run a box outside and drop it in her trunk, faking the records so the drugs seemed to have been used on the floor.

Sondra nodded slowly. "She was coming down to meet me, so I could take her home. She saw me leaving the pharmacy and walking to the car. Nosy bitch watched me, just to be sure."

"She was going to turn you in."

"She didn't believe in cars, but she always rode in them. Why couldn't she just get a license? Christ, I was driving her *everywhere*." She swallowed, hot tears running down her cheeks. Before my eyes, years slipped away from her face. She was a mad little six-year-old, and someone had stolen her bike. She wanted me to understand. "I liked her, I really did. But I didn't have any choice."

"So you killed her."

She recoiled at the nastiness of it.

"It wasn't like that. I just wanted some time to think. I asked her to come out to the car and talk. I had a needleful of fentanyl in the glovebox—Jeff and I were going to get high that night." She shivered. "I caught her in the neck—must have hit a vein because it worked so fast. One minute she was screaming and trying to get out, and the next minute she was hardly breathing. I got really shaky about that—but then I thought, would it be so bad if she stopped breathing? I mean, it was just an accident I gave her so much. It was sort of like she killed herself, really." Sondra shrugged, shook her head sadly. "She should have just taken the money."

I just nodded, gave up trying to follow her logic.

"That stuff is really strong." She was breathing fast now, the words spilling out. "I figured we could toss her off the bridge and she wouldn't feel a thing. There are worse ways to die, right?"

"Right," I agreed. The electric chair, for instance.

"I picked Jeff up; he helped me out. I pulled way over so we hardly had to slow down." Sondra smiled a little at her clever-

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ness. "Later, I dressed up like her and walked around on the railing." She shuddered delicately. "Scared me half to death."

Listening to her was sort of like watching a snake shedding its skin—a kind of revolting fascination. I didn't know we had company, didn't hear anything until a soft metallic *snick-snick* announced his presence.

"All right, friend." It was a cartoon voice, a high-pitched squeak like you get with helium. "Against the wall."

I turned slowly, sizing him up. Jeff was a pretty measly specimen, even for a law student. I could have taken him in a minute except for the nine-millimeter semiautomatic pistol wavering in his hand. His finger was white on the trigger—the sure sign of an amateur. A nine-millimeter can spray a whole fistful of death before Butch Cassidy could ever touch his pearl handles; there's no need to squeeze.

"Easy now, Jeff." I stood slowly, raised my hands, oozed across the room. "I don't want to make a mess on Sondra's pretty rug."

"Get the fentanyl, Sondra." His voice had dropped an octave, thank God. He licked his lips.

"It won't work," Sondra protested. "The police already know about—"

"*Get* it." He was talking out of the side of his mouth now. In the space of ninety seconds, he'd gone through puberty, changed from a scared kid to a seasoned mobster. Amazing what a gun can do for a man. He chewed a lip, thinking furiously while Sondra pulled an ampoule and a fresh syringe from a drawer in the curio cabinet. "We'll make it look like he OD'd. Lose him and his car out in the country somewhere. They might not find him for a couple of weeks."

Their mistake was having Jeff cover me from the other side of the room while Sondra gave me the needle. With a gun against my head, I wouldn't have tried it. I grabbed her and she screamed, twisting and catching my arm with the needle.

The damn fool shot anyway, just once. He got lucky and scored on my other arm, hard enough to spin me around and send me in a slow tumble down to the Persian rug, watching specks of blood fall like summer drizzle, happy to be ruining Sondra's decor if nothing else, grinning about getting a shot in both arms, trying to remember, wasn't there a joke about that? Finally hitting face first with a tooth-jarring thud that somehow felt soft and dreamy as a feather bed. Hearing shouts, faraway shots

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down a long tunnel. Seeing Rachel again in a dream I never wanted to end.

Abe came every day during my time in the hospital, helping with meals, playing the occasional game of chess, and talking. We shared something deeper than chess now, maybe even deeper than our feelings for the little girl who was staying with the Yoders for a time, coming along with Abe on his visits, a bouncing, singing sprite toddling up and down the corridors clinging to the finger of the tall, stern old man. He told me how she reminded him of Leah, dredged up stories of his own daughter's childhood, talked of the joy and the pain, tried vainly to hide his pride in her life and her death.

When I gave him the whole story, he closed his eyes and nodded, satisfied. "She left the Order, and perhaps that was wrong. But she had a plain and simple heart. She lived an honest life."

And died an honest death.

I told him about Rachel. He listened patiently, sympathetically, and always brought me back to the present, to Jessica. "I see much of you in her. And much of someone else—a person full of joy and the future. A person who lives on in her daughter."

On my last day in the hospital, he brought out the chess set again, laid it inside my suitcase, stifled my protests. "It is a poor token of thanks next to what you have done for us, for Leah."

"It's a beautiful set, Abe."

He stood at the bedside, nervously creasing the rim of his black felt hat.

"What's the matter?"

"I have another favor to ask. This time, for my wife." He watched Jessica playing with the set of wooden farm animals he had carved for Leah years ago. "This past week, Edna has grown very close to your Jessica. She thinks that perhaps she might care for your daughter during the workdays, to save you the bother of a long trip to the day-care center."

I thought about the Viral Library, the way the attendants still had trouble remembering Jessica's name, the prospect of another winter of stomach flu. And I realized how content she'd seemed this past week, even though I hadn't been around much. The decision was pretty simple.

"Tell Edna that if she can get her to eat oatmeal, she's hired."

Jessica glanced up from her toys, saw Abe smiling at her, and stretched out her arms to him. "Huck? Huck?"

Abe reached down, picked her up, and gave her a huck. ●

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BY JANWILLEM VAN DE WETERING

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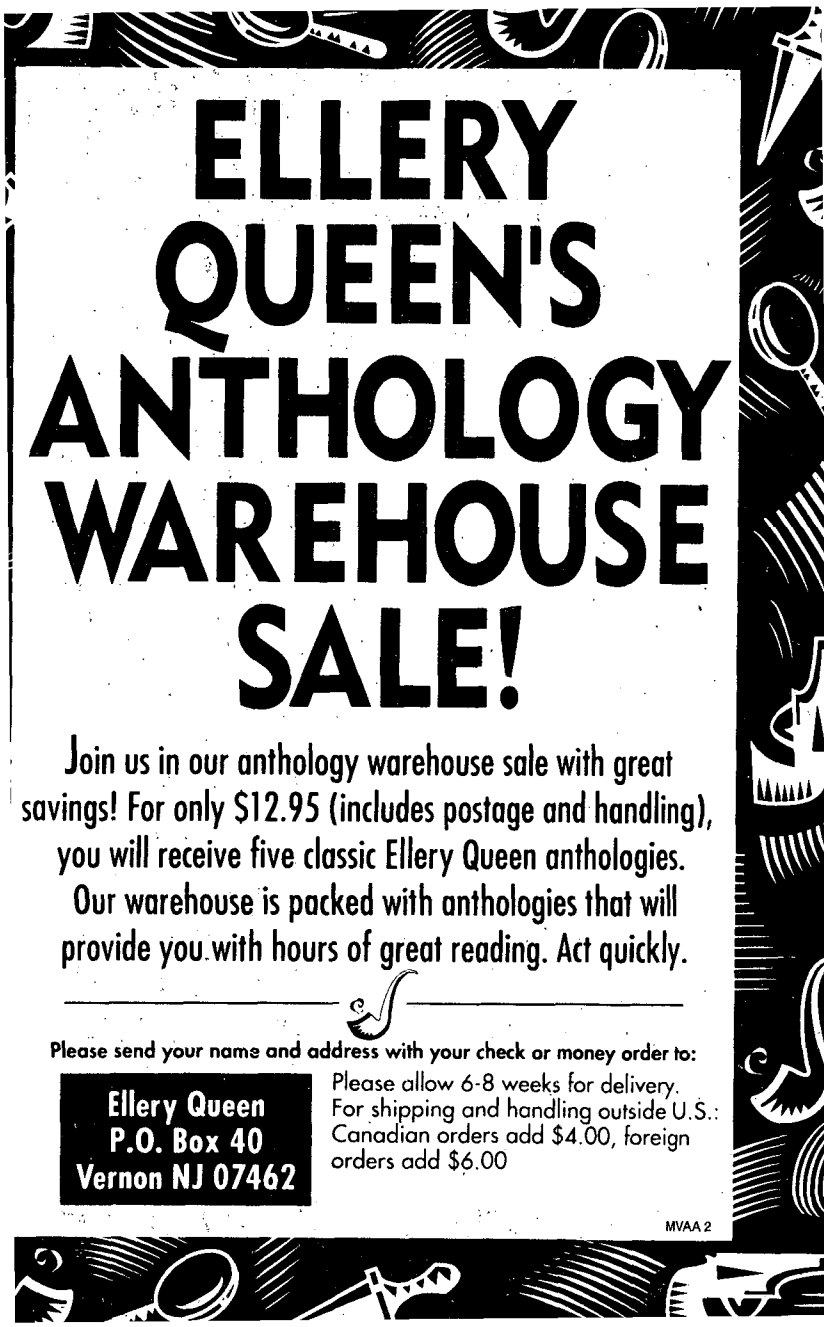
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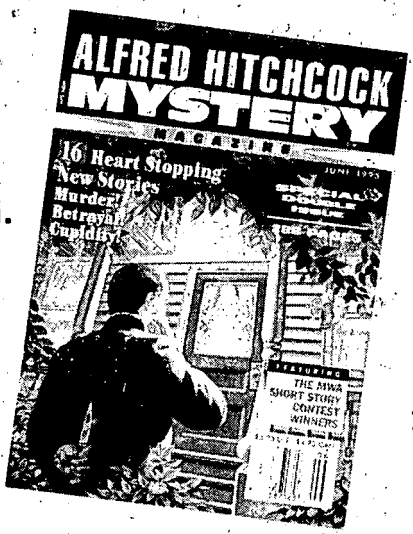

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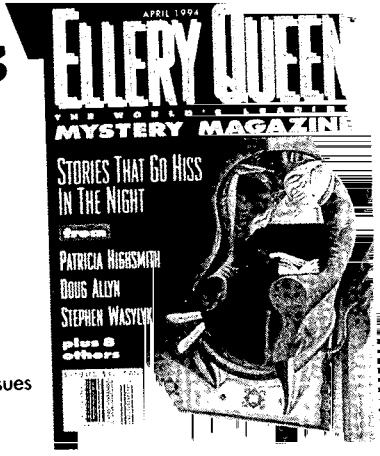

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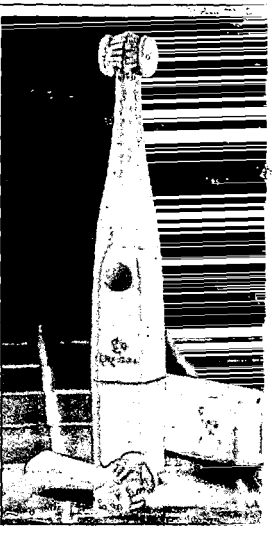

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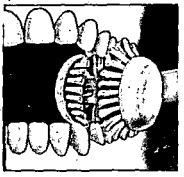

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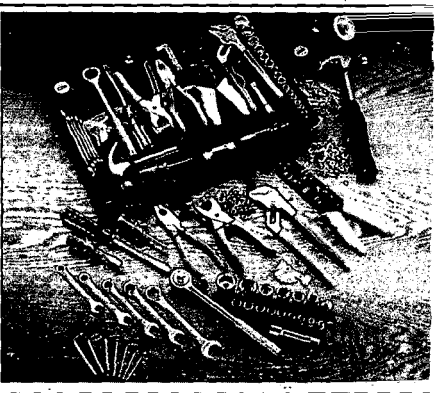

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